

# **in-laws**

## **pro & con**

**By Dr. EVELYN MILLIS DUVALL**

**What makes for good in-law relationships?**

**What do people feel about their mothers-  
and fathers-in-law, daughters- and sons-in-law,  
sisters- and brothers-in-law?**

**This original study with a fresh approach  
shows how EACH of us can be a BETTER in-law.**

## IN-LAWS: PRO & CON

My mother-in-law has left this earth;  
I hope she will never return;  
She must be up with the angels now;  
For I know she's too tough to burn.

—A California daughter-in-law

People have been making jokes about their mothers-in-law ever since a caveman awoke one morning a million years ago to find his mother-in-law, dinosaur-skin suitcase and Brontosaurus-bone rolling pin in hand, glaring into the family cave.

But Dr. Evelyn Millis Duvall (a mother-in-law herself) thinks the old stereotype may soon be passé. She says that younger marriages, military service, and the premature empty-nest of early middle-aged parents-in-law may be bringing in-laws back into style.

In this unique, first-of-its-kind study of relationships by marriage, Dr. Duvall takes a considered look at *all* in-laws, male and female, young and old. On the basis of several years' research involving thousands of individual and group interviews and content analysis of responses to a nationwide radio contest on mothers-in-law, she tells us what makes in-laws difficult, what people most like and dislike about their in-laws, and what there is besides common sense to help us understand and get along with our in-laws. She offers facts and findings, rather than guesses and generalities.

Crowded with case histories, illustrative charts, and quotes from thousands of in-laws, the book shows who is the worst in-law and why. It tells how in-laws affect courting couples and mixed marriages, what in-laws do to make trouble, ways in which in-law relationships can work out happily.

The final section of this popularly presented, provocative report applies the findings to *your* everyday existence with *your own* in-laws. It tells how to be a better relative by marriage no matter whether you're a father-, mother-, brother-, sister-, son-, or daughter-in-law.



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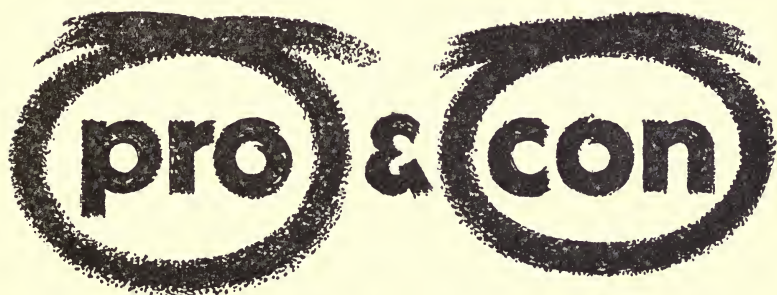


## IN-LAWS: PRO & CON



**in-laws**

EVELYN MILLIS DUVALL, Ph.D.



*An Original Study of Inter-Personal Relations*

Pictorial Charts by George Fox Studios

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## Preface

THE MEN AND WOMEN, 5,020 in number, whose sentiments and experiences form the basis for this exploration of in-law relationships may rightly feel that without them this book could not have been written. Their identities have been masked, but we have tried to preserve their contributions in content and in spirit.

Gratitude goes to the members of the seventeen groups who participated in the collection of data in group settings. The scores of individuals who volunteered many hours of their time in personal interviews will find, we hope, some special satisfaction in the completed study.

Appreciation is due Parke Levy and Spring Byington of the Columbia Broadcasting Company "December Bride" network program. Without their generous sharing of the mother-in-law contest responses, the scope of this study would have been limited.

Thanks are warmly repeated here to the loyal colleagues who assisted in library research, content analysis, data tabulation, and typing.

Acknowledgment of the various scholars, authors, and publishers whose works are quoted is made where they occur in the material.

The inspiration for the work came originally from my many years of admiration and affection for my own mother-in-law, Adelia Barker Duvall, to whose memory this book is lovingly dedicated.

E. M. D.



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## In-Laws in Your Life

**L**IVE LONG ENOUGH and you will be an in-law. Most adults have relatives by marriage. At every marriage, not only the bride and groom and the members of the immediate families but all the other persons who consider themselves relatives are united.

Each year between three million and five million people marry in the United States. The peak in recent years was in 1946 when there were 2,291,000 marriages with 4,582,000 men and women married. In 1953 about 1,553,000 marriages took place,<sup>1</sup> a total of 3,106,000 men and women wed. If each of these persons came from a family with mother, father, and either a brother or a sister, everyone would immediately acquire three close in-laws and a number of more distantly related relatives by marriage. Keeping the number conservative then, let us say that each person who marries gets approximately six members of the spouse's family as his "in-laws." This means that every year between 18 million and 30 million new in-law relationships are established in the United States alone. This is a considerable percentage of the total population. Theoretically, it would take no more than ten years at the present marriage rates to involve every man, woman, and child in the entire country in one or more in-law relationships.

Of course it would never be a universal concern. Orphans

and isolates, refugees and immigrants, runaways and the disinherited, take on the legal status of in-law at their marriages but are not caught up in the usual social and emotional involvements.

Sooner or later the chances are that you and most of the people you know become in-laws, have in-laws, and are involved with in-laws in one way or another. In terms of sheer numbers involved this is an area of life that is of interest to you. But something more than just numerical significance is at work in this area of relationships by marriage . . .

### **Everybody Talks About In-Laws**

Long before you are old enough to marry, you hear a lot about in-laws. By the time you have a mother-in-law of your own, you may have developed powerful feelings about mothers-in-law in general. Before one is old enough to be a mother-in-law, she probably has begun to realize what a difficult relationship it is.

It may be that all this talk about in-laws has made you fear becoming one yourself. You may dread contact with your relatives by marriage just because you have heard so much criticism about in-laws in general.

Or, you may feel that the "in-law problem" has been greatly exaggerated. It may be your experience that in-laws are fine people. You possibly love your relatives by marriage and know that they love you. To a person with your experience, then, the in-law question is one of challenging the widespread prejudice against in-laws as untrue and unfair.

One thing is sure, you cannot escape the popular interest in in-law relationships. Hardly a day goes by but on radio and television, in newspapers and magazines, as well as in conversation, the in-law problem is joked about and discussed.

Mother-in-law is a recurrent theme for humorists. The mere mention of the word brings a smile to many faces. And the audience bursts out in robust laughter when an experienced panelist asks repeatedly on a network quiz show,



"Would it fit my mother-in-law?" One of radio's oldest shows, "Amos and Andy," thrives on dialogues like the following:

Kingfish's mother-in-law: "If I weren't a lady, I'd smash your head with a platter; I'd throw you over a chair . . . I'd . . ."

Kingfish (aside): "It's a good thing she's a lady!"

In a more serious vein are the ubiquitous articles, columns, and interviews reviewing aspects of the in-law relationship. A new president takes office and immediately there appear in newspapers across the country interviews with his wife and his son's wife on how to be good in-laws from their experience.

Marriage counseling cases popularized in current magazines are abundantly illustrated with the trouble in-laws cause in marriage. In one a troubled young husband tells his marriage counselor, "Jill doesn't want to divorce me and take away my children, whatever she says. It's her mother and her meddling sisters and her nosy aunts who want to push me out of the family."

Public airing of in-law indiscretions and inhumanities is a popular theme that crops up in the lives of many notables and runs like a dark thread through many a biography. *Time's* story of "Mrs. R." (April 7, 1952) includes this vivid account of Eleanor Roosevelt's relationship with her mother-in-law:

After the honeymoon her mother-in-law, Sara Delano Roosevelt, treated her like a child. The old lady controlled the family purse strings; she hired the bride's servants, and ruled the bride's house and husband: Franklin always deferred to his mother. A longtime acquaintance remembers Sara Roosevelt saying before company, in thoughtless brutality: "Eleanor, don't act the fool!"

With this widespread interest in the in-law question it is not surprising that advice of all sorts appears in many guises from time to time on "How to get along with your in-laws." One recent blurb on such an article runs, "Why do so many young people have parent trouble? Here's the latest scientific advice on a problem as old as family life."

Strangely enough, with all the general interest in in-law relationships, there is yet to be published a thorough study of the question here in contemporary America. "The latest scientific advice" on this complex question can therefore be but a hunch based, perhaps, on some pertinent bit of statistical or clinical evidence that gives some few clues on the question.

A review of relevant investigations gives some promising directions for further research and some general insights into the central problem. Findings of the scattered research in the area may be summarized briefly into the following four points: (1) In-laws are sometimes a source of trouble. (2) American couples expect to be independent. (3) Relatives have a contribution to make in family living. (4) In-law relationships have been a neglected area in research.

### **In-Laws Are Sometimes a Source of Trouble**

Social workers have found that in-laws cause trouble in some families. More than twenty years ago, an analysis was published of 101 cases of marital maladjustment<sup>2</sup> requiring thorough investigation and casework at the Reconciliation Department of the Court of Domestic Relations in Dayton, Ohio, in which the "influence of relatives" was a factor in 46 cases. The conclusion was:

The influence of relatives as a cause of domestic trouble is surprisingly large. The active sympathy and partisanship of relatives inevitably complicate the adjustment. This is more evident when the married couple are living with relatives. (p. 234)

In 1949, the Family Service Association of America published a study of case records and treatment of 100 families<sup>3</sup> in which "parental ties" were seen as a source of conflict, and "interfering relatives" loomed as an external factor associated with conflict.

A Cornell University team,<sup>4</sup> in interviews with 190 men and 174 women, found that in-law troubles ranked third as a source of marital disagreements: 32.6% of the men, 44.8% of the women, and 38.5% of both reported in-laws as fre-

quent sources of trouble. The authors of the study suggest that more women stress relatives as a cause for trouble in marriage because women have more constant and intimate contact with relatives, and experience more personal frustration than do their husbands.

Judson Landis investigated the time taken to achieve marriage adjustment by 409 couples happily married twenty or more years.<sup>5</sup> He found nearly 10% (9.4%) reporting that they had never had satisfactory in-law adjustments in their marriages.

John L. Thomas surveyed 7,000 broken Roman Catholic marriages which occurred between 1943 and 1948 in St. Louis, Missouri.<sup>6</sup> He went beyond many such studies in distributing the alleged causes of breakdown according to the duration of the marriage. He found that in-laws were reported to be the greatest single cause of marital breakup during the first year of marriage; in subsequent years they become less important.

### **We Don't Even Have a Word for It!**

Not long ago the vice-president of an educational institution invited to lunch the woman whose daughter had recently become his son's bride. As he started to dictate a note to his colleagues, telling them of the guest of the day, he suddenly realized that he knew no term for the relationship of the two sets of parents of the couple. The best he could do was to say, "My son's wife's mother"—roundabout to say the least.

There are other lacks in our language about relatives by marriage. For instance, we have no distinguishing terms for the several types of sisters-in-law. A man may refer to his sister-in-law, by which he may mean his brother's wife, or his wife's sister, or his brother's wife's sister, or even his wife's brother's wife. Similarly, no distinction is made between the various types of brothers-in-law, aunts-in-law, uncles-in-law, nephews- and nieces-in-law, cousins-in-law, and so on. Rivers'<sup>7</sup> observations may be pertinent here—that having no functions

explicit to a relationship, we have no distinctive terms for the various in-law relationships. So, we are more confused in our respective roles than are people for whom specific functions are defined for each particular relation.

Parsons<sup>8</sup> concludes that all this merely reflects the openness of our kinship system:

It is noteworthy that siblings' spouses are terminologically assimilated to sibling status with the suffix "in-law"—generally not used in address or the more intimate occasions of reference—and that nephews and nieces are the same whether they are brothers' or sisters' children and regardless of the sex of ego. Similarly, spouses of children are assimilated to the status of children by the grandchildren. Finally, both siblings-in-law and children-in-law are terminologically segregated from any kinship status relative to ego except that in the particular conjugal family which is under consideration.

The last outer-circle family, the in-law family, has a very particular significance. It is the only one of those linked to ego's inner circle to which he is bound not by descent and consanguinity but only by affinity, and this fact is of paramount importance, signaling as it does the openness of our system. (p. 177)

George Murdock, in the most exhaustive study<sup>9</sup> of the matter yet undertaken, found certain predictable uniformities among some 250 societies. He outlines the expectations and functions of our relatives both by blood and marriage, when he says:

In our own society, where its (kindred) members are collectively called "kinfolk" or "relatives," it (kindred) includes that group of near kinsmen who may be expected to be present and participant on important ceremonial occasions, such as weddings, christenings, funerals, Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners, and family reunions. Members of a kindred visit and entertain one another freely, and between them marriage and pecuniary transactions for profit are ordinarily taboo. One turns first to them for aid when one finds oneself in difficulties. However much they may disagree or quarrel, they are expected to support one another against criticism or affronts from outsiders. (pp. 56-57)

Our language is limited by the lack of distinctive terms for adult sons and daughters, or even for those who have grown up, married, and have children of their own. We use the word



"children" to denote the biological relationship of offspring to their parents, as well as to indicate the immaturity of human individuals. Thus, an older woman referring to "the children" may be speaking collectively of her grown sons and daughters, their spouses, and their children, with no distinction made between the relative levels of maturity of the two younger generations, or recognition given to the status of adulthood and parenthood achieved by her own "children."

The confusion of terms is furthered by our tendency to refer to adults long past childhood as "girls" and "boys." Women in groups of their peers of ages decades past girlhood often refer to each other as "the girls." While men of similar advanced ages speak of "going out with the boys," when it is not immature lads but male peers that are meant. In general we have no familiar terms for intimates among male and female adults either in the family or within friendship groups.

Relevant here is the variety of terms of address used by husbands and wives toward parents of their partners, as shown in a survey conducted by Paul Popenoe<sup>10</sup> of the American Institute of Family Relations:

TERMS OF ADDRESS USED BY 1,603 PERSONS TOWARD THEIR  
PARENTS-IN-LAW

<i>Terms of Address</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Per Cent</i>
Father and Mother	1,067	66
John and Mary	231	15
Mr. and Mrs.	191	12
Grandpa and Grandma	40	3
Direct address	35	2
Pet names	27	2
Title (e.g., "Doctor")	8	
Initials (e.g., "J.B.")	4	
Total	1,603	100

A follow-up of this type of study, designed to reveal differences in terms of address used by men and women with their in-laws, and possible differences by age groups, functions, roles, status, and by the stages of the family life cycle, would be of interest, as would also be an investigation of the types of adjustment signified by the various forms of address.

## American Couples Expect Independence

In-law problems in America may be the result of young married people expecting too much independence. In other times and places continuing parental help and guidance has been generally accepted by young married couples. The dowry and the bride price of other cultures, the roof-raising and housewarmings of our own pioneer days, and the extended family under one roof so common among farmers everywhere, all have been established ways in which the older generation has continued to help out the younger at the time of their marriage.

Even the matter of setting up housekeeping was until recent times a whole family responsibility. In a former day, the various members of the family were expected to pitch in and fix up the new establishment for the newly married pair.

Down the old South Road in rural Vermont rattled the heavy old "lumber wagon" outfitted with the hayrack whose sides extended to twice the vehicle's usual width. Every extra inch would be needed, for this was a "collecting party." The young couple about to be married, accompanied by several of their laughing young friends, made their way to every relative's home. It was a gay adventure collecting pieces of furniture, household equipment, and farm machinery that could be spared for the bare house on the old North Forty that was to be their home. Aunts and uncles, cousins and others even more distantly related, good-naturedly set out for the visiting caravan those things that they were donating for the new family. Old Uncle Ezra "protected" his rocking chair from what he called "the marauding pirates" by sitting on it at the corner of the porch while his wife helped the young people pack up some of her preserves, and carry down from the attic old furnishings that could be "fixed up good as new." No rugged independence here. Families expected to "set the young people up" when they married.

Today, what a different picture! The young couple must buy most of what they need to outfit their home. Beyond the



prenuptial shower (which a close relative may not give for a bride) and the wedding gifts, little else is expected to start the young couple out in housekeeping.

Margaret Mead, experienced anthropologist,<sup>11</sup> sees these contemporary patterns of independence as productive of conflicts between young married couples and their parents:

Very few human societies have encouraged young people to start a new family with such small backing from parents and the wider kin group. Actually a great deal of help, both formal and informal, is given to new marriages, but it is not only not something which may be legitimately expected but it is actually something about which young people may feel considerable hesitation if not a real sense of inadequacy in accepting. (p. 455)

Education is a modern equivalent of the dowry of other times. Today, a girl is given an education that supposedly fits her to support herself whether she marries or not. When she does marry she is expected to share the economic burden of establishing and supporting her household by her work outside the home, in a way unheard of in former times.

Many a married student's wife laughingly says that she is getting her Ph.T., by which she means she is "putting hubby through" his schooling, and is making ends meet until he is equipped to take over as economic partner of the house.

It is further expected that education will qualify the young adult for the complex tasks of mate selection, courtship techniques, and the skills required for building a successful marriage and family life. These things were once learned in the process of growing up in the kind of family one was about to establish oneself. But when patterns of family life change as rapidly as they do from one generation to another today, just growing up in a family may not be enough preparation for what it takes to found one's own. Today's greater emphasis on the companionship type of relationship puts more complex demands upon both members of the pair for a quality of emotional interaction that will be mutually satisfying, than Grandma and Grandpa ever faced. This is a lot to expect of

the young people, and it certainly is a great deal to expect of education, as Mead indicates when she says:

The assumption is that the parents have given their children of both sexes a "good education" which equips them to choose a mate, earn a living, and manage their lives for themselves with a minimum of help, advice, or interference. (p. 455)

Doubling-up is frowned upon in America today. It is generally assumed that a young married couple will have a place of their own. That couple who even briefly make their home with one parental family or the other do so with the twin attitude of "making the best of it" and "it's only for a while." It is not expected that they will enjoy or even pleasantly accept the shared household, but that they will suffer the hospitality as temporary at best.

Seen as even more unfortunate is the married couple who must take in with them one of their aging parents. It is considered deplorable that such an "outsider" share their home, even for a while. The in-law child is expected to have to "put up with" the spouse's parent, as unwilling host for the duration of the "intrusion." The outspoken sympathy the unrelated spouse receives from friends and neighbors bespeaks the generally held notion of the ideal family as the one that consists only of husband, wife, and their children.

It is the way that we define "the good family" that makes for some of the strain. If we still considered the large extended family as ideal, we would take as a matter of course the various relatives that might make up the household. As Talcott Parsons<sup>8</sup> reflects in his analysis of the American kinship system:

For young people not to break away from their parental families at the proper time is a failure to live up to expectations, an unwarranted expression of dependency. But, just as they have a duty to break away, they also have a right to independence. Hence for an older couple—or a widow or widower—to join the household of a married child is not, in terms of the kinship structure, a natural arrangement. This is proved by the fact that it is seldom done at all except under pressure,

either for economic support or to mitigate extreme loneliness and social isolation. Even though in such situations it may be the best solution of a difficult problem it frequently involves considerable strain, which is by no means confined to one side. The whole situation would be radically different in a different kind of kinship structure. (p. 200)

Of course, there are reasons for the small husband-wife-child household being the accepted one today. Now that most families live in cities where living space is limited, and few chores need to be done, little place is available for "extras" in the home. As long as there was plenty of room for Grandma and lots of apple butter and bread and clothing for her to make, she was welcome with her married children. But, not so today. Now there is literally no room for relatives in the close quarters of the typical city family.

### **Relatives Make a Contribution to Family Life**

Every system has its price. The costs of maintaining the small independent American family may be greater than we realize. Many a modern institution has had to come in to take over some of the functions performed by relatives who used to live with the married couple.

One illustration is the "baby-sitter." What used to be done as matter of course by a resident grandmother or a visiting aunt in "taking care of the children while their parents are away" now is an economic contract with an outsider.

Similarly, the Visiting Nurses Association assumes the duties once ascribed to one of the women of the house in caring for the sick. So it is, too, with the Old People's Homes, hospitals, housekeeping services. Even Big Business now produces what used to be made in the home by the combined efforts of all the willing hands who made up the household.

The impoverishment that comes from too great an insistence upon independence from parents on the part of young married couples is a familiar theme among social scientists. Certain needs of the young family—cultural, emotional, economic

—could better be met by continued contact with parents than in the present-day system of expecting to cut all ties as soon as the nuptials are over.

Faris<sup>12</sup> relates interaction between the generations with family stability, as he notes with regret the contemporary intergenerational cleavages:

Among modern, particularly urban, populations, it is generally recognized that there exists a serious, though still only partial, cultural discontinuity between generations . . . probably the largest amount of such discontinuity is that which results from the present transitional state of civilization. Immigration from abroad to this land, or migration from farm to city, involves such a change of culture that a gap between parents, who know the old culture, and children, who almost exclusively absorb the new, is all but inevitable. . . . Because of such a break in continuity, folk knowledge—the intellectual and moral capital—fails to be transmitted, and thus the younger generation is left unprovided with the heritage that is of such importance in the maintaining of a successful family institution. (pp. 161-162)

. . . for those families in which the generations have been widely split apart, the loss of the heritage of knowledge may precede by some decades the replacement by the new. Thus a large part of the young generation of today appears destined to suffer from cultural malnutrition, some effects of which may remain beyond the present century. (p. 164)

More optimistic are the findings of Marvin Sussman,<sup>13</sup> who has studied the extent to which members of the older and younger generations actually do help one another. He finds that in spite of general expectations of rather complete independence of the young couple, in actual practice there is a great deal of give and take between parents and their married children. In 154 out of 195 cases he finds that parents have established a pattern for giving help and service to their married children's families.

The most usual forms of help reported in Sussman's study are: gifts such as furniture and equipment at the time of marriage; financial assistance in some of their larger expenditures; loans or gifts of money for special items, services such as gardening, house building, painting and repairing the house; and



such personal assistance as periodic care of the grandchildren, nursing during illness, and inexpensive vacations for the young families. In return for such help to the young people, parents expect continued affection, inclusion in some activities, and personal attention. The overwhelming proportion of the parents do not expect their children to support them financially, saying vehemently, "I hope I never have to," and "I would go to the poorhouse first."

Speaking particularly of the American middle-class family, Dr. Sussman concludes that it is not as isolated or as independent as it is generally thought to be, but that "affectional and economic ties still link the generational families and give stability to their relationships." (p. 28)

### **Modern Conditions Call for Closer Family Ties**

It may well be that in-laws are coming back in style! There are several conditions of modern life that possibly will bring about a closer relationship between married children and their parents. Ten recent social trends that may operate to close the gap between young couples and the members of their extended families are listed below:

1. Couples marry young, often before the man is through school and established vocationally, thus often requiring some parental subsidy. (Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census)

2. Young women marry at a median age of 20 years, and have their babies at as young an age as did their grandmothers. They are often occupied not only with home responsibilities, and help to husbands still in training, but in outside employment as well. Therefore, many grandmothers find themselves with babies on their laps as their daughters and daughters-in-law juggle a multiplicity of roles at an early age. (Beale and Riemer, "Marriage Trends and Marriage Patterns")

3. Military service takes young men out of their homes at the time when many of them are newly married. This often forces young wives back into their parental homes, or to live with their in-laws until the period of service is over.

4. Now that families are smaller, and children leave home at earlier ages, many men and women are left in an empty nest while still in early middle-age with active desires for continued usefulness. (Paul Glick, "The Family Cycle" *American Sociological Review*, XII, April, 1947, pp. 164-174)

5. Nearly one-third of all young couples who marry for the first time double up with relatives for the first two years of marriage. Therefore the stark alternatives are either some degree of in-law acceptance or disruption. (Paul Glick, "First Marriages and Remarriages" *American Sociological Review*, XIV:6, December, 1949, pp. 726-734)

6. As educational and income levels increase, a larger proportion of American families falls within the middle class. Income per family member has already doubled within the first half of the twentieth century, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Middle-class families tend to experience more situations for which they consider themselves inadequate. So, in their crises more families may be expected to turn to parents and parents-in-law for help. (Earl L. Koos, "Middle-Class Family Crises" *Marriage and Family Living*, X:2, May, 1948)

7. Recent emphases on mental hygiene and personality growth and development are being incorporated in parents' conceptions of their children and themselves. As more persons see themselves and each other as maturing individuals for whom personal fulfillment and growth are primary values, many of the older hazards of intrafamily contact will be prevented. (Evelyn Millis Duvall, "Conceptions of Parenthood" *American Journal of Sociology*, LII:3, November, 1946, pp. 193-203)

8. The widespread concern for the problems of the aging, as their numbers increase in the total population, serves to underline the importance of adults assuring their economic and emotional independence so that they will not become a burden to themselves and their children in later years. This tends to remove from both generations fears of enforced depend-



ence, and to free the parents, parents-in-law, and their children to enjoy each other as persons.

9. Global campaigns against prejudice of groups of people (races, ethnic groups, religions, classes) have furthered the recognition of persons as persons. This climate of opinion may be expected to operate in more widespread acceptance of in-laws, who for many years have been subject to negative prejudice among Americans.

10. The widespread tendency to challenge practices that are no longer functional, which has arisen as a result of the secularization and the industrialization of modern life, may be expected to question traditional prejudices against in-laws. Men and women increasingly may build their in-law relationships on the basis of personal experience rather than according to traditional stereotypes and taboos.

### **In-Laws: A Neglected Area of Research**

These ten hypotheses about a possible change in the climate of in-law acceptance are yet to be explored. Other fundamental questions about relatives related by marriage are still to be plumbed. This area of family life, so central in the lives of all of us, is to date generally unstudied and unknown.

Hardly believing that the paucity of published materials on in-law relationships fully represented the field, the author wrote to a dozen recognized family research men and women, seeking their guidance. Their replies were unanimous on two points: (1) In-laws represent a crucial and important area of family relationships. (2) In-laws are a neglected area in family research.

Theodore Caplow of the University of Minnesota replied in the theme that ran through reactions from experts in the field:

I find, after a quick survey, that I know of no material at all on the relationships between parents and adult children. This is shocking. You seem to have come upon one of those curious areas which is obviously important, but has somehow been overlooked. Do let me know what you find out.

Others have pointed out such lacks in family research for some years now. In 1945, Read Bain published a paper entitled "Needed Research in Parent-Child Fixation"<sup>14</sup> in which he outlined twenty questions for further investigation, several of which would bear directly upon in-law relationships, although not specifically so stated in his paper.

Belle Boone Beard, in an article on the aging,<sup>15</sup> speaks of the lack of material on the empty nest stage of family life, and reflects that older parents living with married children are always cited as problems to the children's marriage, with no mention of possible advantages or constructive reforms. She concludes that this is altogether a neglected area of research.

Challenged by the need for investigation of in-law relationships in our life today, we began some time ago to collect data that might open up the field for exploration. Our methods are briefed below. Our findings are elaborated throughout the rest of the book. As in any pilot study, more questions than answers emerge. This has value, since it is only as more carefully defined questions are raised, that research can become sharply focused. Our own work is seen to be but exploratory, of value chiefly in pointing the trails that seem promising for further pioneering, and in mapping out the general terrain of the area.

### **Current Exploration of In-Law Relationships**

To date some 5,020 men and women have participated in our pilot study of what persons feel about, and how they work out their relationships with, their in-laws. These men and women live in every state of the union. They are both urban and rural, in percentages significantly similar to those of the population of the United States. Some have been married a few weeks, others for forty years or more. The larger representation is among those more recently married (ten years or less). Considerably more women than men have been active in contributing material for the study. These men and women come from many religious, ethnic, nationality, racial,

and socioeconomic groups, with a heavier weighting of the less privileged than is usually found in more restricted sampling.

Such broad representation was secured by group and individual interviews, and through the content analysis of the total response to a national network radio contest soliciting letters on "Why I Think Mothers-in-Law Are Wonderful People."

Group interviews were conducted in 17 groups of men and women in 11 states of the various regions (Deep South, East, Middle West, West Coast) of the country. Groups were matched on such variables as religious affiliation, professional experience, urban-rural backgrounds, sex, and number of years married. Data were collected in such group settings as mothers' groups, student wives' clubs, men's service clubs, graduate students' classes, home demonstration agents' state conferences, teachers' meetings, and nurses' gatherings.

The technique used was a modification of the method the author had found fruitful in a former exploratory investigation.<sup>16</sup> Plain blank 3 by 5 cards were distributed, one to each member of the group. Minimal fact sheet information was requested at the top of the card. Then each person was asked to write the name of the in-law relationship which in his or her experience had been most difficult, followed immediately by the listing of three things this most difficult in-law did or did not do that made the relationship difficult. Those in the group who had never had difficulties with their in-laws were asked to signify "No problems" and to list three things their in-laws had done that had contributed to their family harmony.

As soon as the majority of the group had filled in their cards, those who felt that "they had something for the book" in either exceptionally good or particularly unfortunate experiences with their in-laws were asked to volunteer personal interviews by placing their names, addresses, and telephone numbers on the back of their cards. Sixty of the total 1,337, approximately 5%, contributed individual interviews of from

one to three hours each. These life history and personal experience accounts served as a check upon the responses of the group, and tended to clarify and elaborate their capsule comments.

Keeping the original wording of the individual participants, categories were established both of in-laws mentioned as being difficult, and of their behavior mentioned as causing trouble. Similarly the behaviors listed as contributing to family harmony were categorized for analysis. Attempts were made to discover differences in the types of response by sex, years married, religious affiliation, urban-rural residence, and regional representation.

Of 3,683 persons who sent in letters about their mothers-in-law, 2,743 (75%) were women, and 940 (25%) were men. Young marriages were represented in larger numbers than those longer established in a straight-line relationship.

The four regions as used in the U.S. Census classification were used for the geographical divisions in this study of contest entrants. Letters were received from every state in the union and the District of Columbia in percentages approximating the population percentages of the states within the United States. The regional representation of the contest entrants parallels remarkably the percentage of the total population residing within the region.

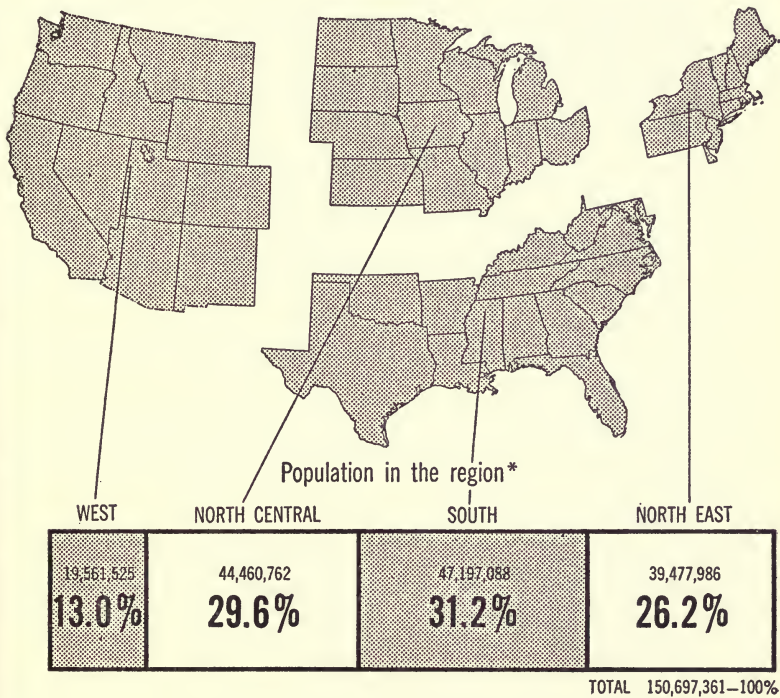
Sixty-three per cent (2,299) of the letters came from men and women in urban areas, with 37% (1,384) in communities of 2,500 population or less. This compares with the 1950 Census figures that list the total population as 64% urban and 36% rural residents. Region by region, practically the same percentage of the total sample is urban as the urban population within that region as given in 1950 Census data. Thus we see that the persons submitting letters in response to the challenge of the mother-in-law question are remarkably representative of the population as a whole in both regional and in urban-rural residence.

Each of the 3,683 letters was read for its predominant sentiment in a process of content analysis by two experienced



TABLE 1

# Regional representation of Mother-in-law contest entrants



## Contest entrants from the region



\* Bureau of the Census, United States Census of Population: 1950 General Characteristics U.S. Summary (P-B1), Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1952, p.1-105, Table 58.

TOTAL 3,683—100%

social scientists, with 93.5% agreement. Using the original wording, categories were formed in a pre-run reading of a random sample. Then the predominant sentiment of each letter was tabulated within these categories by sex, and rural-urban residence within the state from which it came.

Some of the questions considered in the material we have available are:

1. Are persons personally influenced by stereotyped mother-in-law jokes?
2. Are there indications that traditional in-law humor is being challenged today?
3. Is mother-in-law the most difficult of all in-laws? If so, why?
4. What do in-laws do that is troublesome?
5. Do men or women have more in-law difficulties?
6. Which in-laws are most acceptable, which most objectionable to men and to women? Specifically how do siblings-in-law, fathers-in-law, and other relatives by marriage rate as in-laws?
7. Are children-in-law generally as much criticized as are parents-in-law?
8. In what ways can in-law adjustments be interpreted?
9. Specifically, what patterns of in-law relationships can be identified and understood by those who are, have, or would be in-laws?
10. What are the implications, about what is involved in being a good in-law, that might serve as guides for any man or woman who is, may be, or has a relative by marriage?

In summary, it is clear that there is a great deal of popular interest in in-law relationships. Although in-law adjustments are of great importance to individuals and to families, to date there has been no adequate study of them. Review of the literature turns up some promising leads for further research but provides answers for none of the basic questions about in-law relationships. We have listed ten reasons why in-laws may be coming back in style, as relatives accepted for their

contributions to family life. Our pilot study of in-law relationships aims to explore questions about in-laws that may be personally helpful.

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## Mother-in-Law Jokes

**M**OTHER-IN-LAW JOKES can be heard anywhere in the United States. They are told by all classes of people. They appear in all the popular media: radio, television, films, newspapers, magazines, comic strips, cartoons, as well as in joke book collections.

Hardly had this investigation of American in-law relationships been launched when two things became apparent. One, that the mention of in-laws in most groups and for the great majority of individual men and women means mother-in-law first of all. And two, that the first reaction to the mother-in-law idea is the retelling of a mother-in-law joke.

The "Have you heard this one?" first response to the mention of interest concerning in-law relationships brought in a flood of mother-in-law jokes, cartoons, and cracks from hundreds of the men and women who have participated in the investigation.

Upon analysis it soon became evident that the many hundreds of mother-in-law jokes that appear and reappear in all parts of the country, and from all kinds of people, actually are but variations on a few familiar themes.

### Themes in American Mother-in-Law Jokes

1. Mother-in-law talks too much.
2. Mother-in-law knows all the answers—the wrong ones.



3. Mother-in-law is a meddlesome troublemaker.
4. Mother-in-law is ego-deflating.
5. Mother-in-law is mean.
6. Mother-in-law is a loathsome object of aggression.
7. Mother-in-law comes too often and stays too long.
8. Mother-in-law is to be avoided.

It is evident that these recurring themes in American mother-in-law humor are in a kind of "mad music." They are characterized by negative feelings toward mother-in-law. They are essentially stereotyped hostility and avoidance. Actually they are not funny except in the expected repetition of a hostile point of view toward mother-in-law. In the same way that Jack Benny's tightness and Charley McCarthy's naughtiness are themes that appear in hundreds of their jokes, so hostility and avoidance are the expected attitudes upon which mother-in-law jokes are built.

Variations on these eight mother-in-law joke themes serve to underline their essential similarity. Whether the story comes from an urban professional person or an untutored mountaineer, the theme is the same. Regardless of the section of the country, the sex or age of the teller, or the locale of the setting, the stories are basically similar within a given theme.

### **Mother-in-Law Talks Too Much**

The stereotype says that mother-in-law talks too much—in every dialect. No matter where the comment comes from the overtalkativeness theme is apparent in many variations. Only once in more than 5,000 responses has there been a complaint of silence in a mother-in-law. At the same time, literally scores of stories and wisecracks have their point in the mother-in-law's expected "running at the mouth," as one wag put it. Here are just a few illustrative selections:

A New Yorker describes her as having—

A heart as big as a mountain and a mouth twice the size.

A married woman in Vermont asks the riddle:

Question: "Why is a mother-in-law like an accordion?"

Answer: "Because you have to knock the wind out of both of them to shut them up."

A woman in Florida suggests:

A good use for zippers yet to be exploited is for mothers-in-laws' mouths.

A fellow in New Mexico who signs himself "Blue Denim Bill" says:

I like my mother-in-law because she is exactly like my wife—beautiful, plump, dumb, expensive, and our star boarder. In addition, she is the leading gossip and the naggingest old woman in the entire country. Please don't use my correct name as I still want my wife.

While still another fellow in the same region summarizes this type of mother-in-law stereotype with the simple statement:

My mother-in-law is like all others—a noisy yacketty-yack, just another mouth to heed.

### **She Knows All the Answers—the Wrong Ones**

Infallible persons are mother-in-laws,  
Our perplexities, she solves, just "Because!"  
Solutions, she hands us—Why, we need not think.  
We do just the opposite, because—Hers stink.

The four-line lament above from a Pennsylvanian is matched by that in prose from a woman in Iowa who says:

I like my mother-in-law because she is always right. Anytime I'm unsure about the date, time, color or smell of anything, she knows the answers. She certainly reminds me of my shortcomings and keeps making them shorter. She smiles when I'd like sympathy and laments when I'm in a glorious moment. . . .

A graduate student in a large state university in the Midwest grins as he gripes:

Who was it that thought I was not quite good enough for her sweet little girl? My mother-in-law. Who told my loving little spouse to go ahead and buy that expensive watch that we couldn't afford yet, yes,

always suggests the impossible? My mother-in-law. Who does the little wife use as the ultimate authority, and hold as a threat in an argument? My dear old mother-in-law. Who cackles the loudest and never lets you forget when she lucks out on you in a game of gin or bridge? You know who. . . .

A housewife in Tennessee puts it even more strongly when she generalizes:

Mothers-in-law know all the answers, such as what food Junior should eat, the games he should play, etc., etc. It's unthinkable for little Suzie to play with children "with no background." My hats, dresses, and all the rest are never quite right or appropriate. Isn't my make-up a little loud for a mother? My cooking is never up to par. As a housekeeper I'm not too efficient. Last but not least, it's unthinkable for cultured Christian folks to attend and take the children to a good movie occasionally. Believe me, I'd collapse if my mother-in-law paid me a compliment. Bologna to the home-wreckers!

### **Mothers-in-Law Are Meddlesome Troublemakers**

Closely related to the "know-it-all" theme are the many variations of the meddlesomeness motif in the wry humor of the mother-in-law jokes:

"The Court must have evidence that none dares dispute," says the judge sternly.

"That's what I'm giving, Your Honor," replies the witness humbly. "It was my mother-in-law who told me."

A married woman in Colorado expands upon the theme in the following twisted ode to mothers-in-law:

They give advice even without being asked for it.

They give you their time sometimes weeks at a time.

They give you their patience, the set of their lips and glare in their eyes radiates it.

They give you a helping hand so you can "hand it to them."

They let you know what's expected of you and always expect more.

They never jump to conclusions, they always draw their own.

They try not to be in the way and sometimes even try to act like you're not in the way.

They may be sweet but from time to time we think they're pretty sour.

Even more articulate is the sarcastic diatribe that comes from a woman columnist in the West:

I have a wonderful Mother-in-law. If it weren't for the fact her son chose the wrong girl, she wouldn't be so busy. Of course, no girl is good enough for her son. But by him choosing me, I am the lucky one to be receiving her snarls.

She has reason to rave and throw her 180 pounds around when her son (but of course it is her daughter-in-law's fault) refuses to divulge his business to her.

It isn't her fault when she has to keep nagging when an inconsiderate daughter-in-law won't acquiesce to all her wishes.

It is for her son's own good that she gives the sound advice about how he should never listen to his wife.

She is determined to save her son's home from the pitfalls of inexperience, and is adamant in her will to give to that home the benefits of her years of knowledge.

She will be the first to admit that it will do her daughter-in-law good to have to go without many of the things she wants.

And, she sincerely confides that it is to the best of family relations that her son should NEVER be weak enough to let his wife influence him above his own Mother's wise guiding.

She reasons in a sensible way that she realizes he isn't a child any more, but she can see for herself that he still needs her loving hand as much now as he did in his pants-buttoning days.

She works very hard at her chosen profession of making her daughter-in-law's life as miserable as possible.

She is doing a magnificent job in her concentration on being a successful trouble maker. And, she is serious in her attempts to keep trouble in a constant turmoil.

A man in South Dakota puts the point much more succinctly when he says:

Mother-in-law is ever ready to help, usually a little too much. She will go all out for you or vice versa. She can make modern mechanized warfare seem like a game of tiddle-de-winks.

It takes a young woman in Georgia to put it personally:

If I want to buy a house, she suggests to rent one. If I want to go to a party, she thinks it's best to stay home. When I pet the baby, she thinks it needs spanking. When I want her to baby-sit, she is sick.

A woman from a small Illinois town offers this animadversion:

I think mother-in-laws are wonderful because they are so nosy. They meddle in every one's business and stir up Old Nick in general. . . .

A rancher's wife in Oregon comments:

Mothers-in-law have such a skillful way of keeping the marital pot boiling that there's never a dull moment.

A Texan makes it simple:

A mother rocks the cradle, but a mother-in-law rocks the boat.

A woman in Baton Rouge outlines the multiple functions in which a mother-in-law considers herself adept; "if you don't believe it, just ask one":

Mother-in-law—a foreign body of doubtful origin, species recognized instantly by a large opening in middle of face, ruddered by flopping tongue. Natural habitat—your home! Occupation—your business! Can be of real help however, in the following ways:

Physician—diagnoses instantly any symptom, furnishes panaceas for all ills, home remedies a specialty.

Adviser—financial matters, vacation tips, health, voting, baby care. Authority on all subjects.

Information Bureau—can tell you exactly where to go!

Tabulator—keeps track of everything you do, multiplies by 4, divides 2 people, adds confusion, and leaves you minus!

Mechanic—oils you up, gauges you to proper boiling point, deflates you daily, provides free air and even toots own horn.

### **Mother-in-Law Is Ego-Deflating**

The satire that comes from men portrays mother-in-law as one who whittles them down to size in a constant barrage of ego-deflation.

A man in Cleveland writes as a satirist:

When you think you've done something doggone well  
And everyone thinks you're pretty swell,  
You walk on air and head swells to moon-size—  
In your mother-in-law's eyes,  
You're still strictly a goon guy.  
It's a wonderful way to regain your perspective,  
Her candid opinion is cruel but constructive.  
She's hard as nails, I'll sure tell you  
She didn't blacken my eye, that's just not true.  
She's wonderful and sweet, a good doer and how.  
Gee, Ma, can't I come out of the basement now?



Another fellow puns, when asked if his mother-in-law is enjoying her trip to the mountains:

"No, I'm afraid not. She's found something at last that she can't walk over."

A man in New Jersey expresses the ego-deflating theme briefly:

This is to that mother-in-law  
Who still can't see what her daughter saw  
In that no good son-in-law.

Oh yes, she'll admit  
If she's forced to it,  
He brings home the bacon,  
But not like old J.P. can.

### Mother-in-Law Is Mean

My mother-in-law has left this earth;  
I hope she will never return;  
She must be with the angels now;  
For she was too tough to burn.  
(Mrs. A., California)

A number of people use mother-in-law's aggressive temper as a way of illustrating the meanness theme in their mother-in-law jokes:

She is even-tempered—mad all the time. (Mrs. H., Brooklyn, N. Y.)

She is known affectionately around our blissful abode as "Spitfire" . . . indeed we are defenseless against such a sharp tongue and biting sarcasm. (Mrs. J., Stratford, N. Y.)

I think she is wonderful, the most understanding person in the world. What else can I say? She is standing behind me as I write this with the rolling pin in her hand. (Mr. Dick, Marion, N. D.)

An unsavory picture of mother-in-law appears in this acrostic paralleling the familiar one done for mothers in a quite different vein:

M is for the many things she called me—  
O means only debts, now grown old;  
T is for the trouble she inflicted,  
H is for her hair of well-dyed gold.  
E is for the eats she gobbled daily  
R means rent the landlord never saw;  
I is for the idiotic gestures  
N is for the night she broke my jaw.  
L is for the looks she gave me daily—  
A is for the antics she went through;  
W's for the wedding she disrupted;  
The letters spell the whole darn thing to you!

### **Mother-in-Law Is a Loathsome Object of Aggression**

American mythology places the mother-in-law in the role of the bad fairy in contrast to the mother who is the good fairy of the family. Mother is all that is sweet, tender, kind, ever-patient, and all-loving; while mother-in-law is a loathsome creature upon whom all the latent hostilities within one may be vented. It is not permitted to voice hatred of one's mother except on the analyst's couch. But open hostile aggression is quite acceptable toward one's mother-in-law. Indeed it is one of the more frequent forms of the mother-in-law joke.

"How do you like keeping bees?"

"Fine! We don't get much honey, but the bees have stung my mother-in-law several times."

"I thought you ought to know that your dog bit my mother-in-law yesterday."

"He did? Then I suppose you want me to settle for damages."

"No, not at all, I just came by to see how much you want for the dog."

"Did you know that while we were hunting this morning, you almost shot my mother-in-law?"

"So sorry. Here, take my gun and have a shot at mine."

A man in Massachusetts sends a variation on the theme:

There was a sad incident one day in the heart of the Ozark Mountains. A farmer's mule kicked his mother-in-law to death. A tremendous crowd turned out for the funeral, but it was made up almost entirely of men. The minister commented, "This old lady must have been



mighty popular because so many people will leave their work to come to her funeral."

"They're not here for the funeral," said the surprised farmer. "They're here to buy the mule."

Still others, both men and women, phrase their hostile humor in more personal terms:

My mother-in-law is an old bat with a face like an ape and a voice like a file scraping on tin. (Mr. J., North Carolina)

At dinner time we sit down at the table and watch her eat like a bird—a vulture. She has two black eyes. . . . I ought to know, I gave them to her. (Mrs. P., New York)

The best place for a boil is on a mother-in-law's neck. (Mrs. V., Minnesota)

This whole idea of mothers-in-law—marital shorthand meaning built-in lawyer—is just a nasty scheme to promote monogamy. Who could stand more than one? There have been so many jokes lately about the dear souls that one headline in a local paper states, "Mothers-in-Law Are Revolting." Well, mine certainly is. (Mr. C., Connecticut)

### **She Comes Too Often and Stays Too Long**

Mother-in-law as the unwelcome guest is an old familiar theme. It was always good for a laugh on the vaudeville stage of several decades ago. Today, the same jokes in the same vein are a part of the everyday fare of comedians on radio and TV, in press and films. The point is a simple one: Mother-in-law is not wanted around the homes of her married children. Here are just a few selected samples of this theme:

Mrs. Jones was packing for her return home after a long visit with her married daughter.

"How long is it until my train leaves?" she asks her son-in-law.

"Six hours, thirteen minutes and four seconds, mother dear," is his reply.

"Do you mean to stand there and tell me that you have been married ten years and that your mother-in-law has visited you only once?"

"That's right. She came the day after we were married and is with us still."

"I can't understand it," says Mrs. Smith to her husband. "Mother writes that she's not accepting our invitation to come for a visit because we don't appear to want her. What can she mean by that? I asked you to write her to come at her convenience. You did write to her, didn't you?"

"Sure," replies the husband sheepishly. "But I couldn't spell the word 'convenience' so I made it 'risk' instead."

"Joe, I'm tied up at the plant. Here's five dollars for you if you will go get my mother-in-law at the station."

"O.K. But, suppose she is not there?"

"Then you'll get another five dollars."

### Mother-in-Law Is to Be Avoided

Men and women from every part of the country say in stereotyped repetition that the solution to the mother-in-law problem is *distance*. Of all the stereotypes this is the most common in mother-in-law humor for both men and women. Many of these comments are in identical wording, or so closely resemble each other that variety is difficult to distinguish. Here is a selected sample of the more common forms:

She lives in Vermont and they have had a big snow storm there and she can't get out to visit us until spring. (Mr. F., Connecticut)

The reason I love my mother-in-law is she gave me the best wife in the world and then moved three thousand miles away. (Mr. J., Scranton, Pa.)

My mother-in-law is pretty swell, because I haven't seen her yet, and I've been married fifteen years. (Mr. W., Minnesota)

In my case my mother-in-law is like a rose: untrained and wild and the nicest thing about her is she is 1,100 miles away. (Mrs. K., New York)

A second variation on the avoidance theme is the send-her-as-far-away-as-possible motif. It comes from every region of the country in substantially the same form. A professor of psychology in the Midwest responds to news of this study with the characteristic "Have you heard this one?" story:

It seems a man's mother-in-law was contemplating a trip to the

Thousand Islands, and was wondering about spending a week there; to which he replies, "Why not spend a week on each island?"

A New York janitor tells this one:

I answered a knock on my door to find a woman there who asked, "Won't you please give something to our Old Ladies' Home?" To which I replied, "Sure, why not? Just take along my mother-in-law."

A West Coast lawyer responds with this story of a kidnapper who wrote a note to a wealthy man:

"Send me \$10,000 in cash or I'll kidnap your wife's mother." To which the man replied, "Sorry, I'm short of cash at the moment, but your proposition interests me very much."

A prominent churchman in the Deep South tells of the parish priest who went to see his parishioner to make arrangements for the funeral of the latter's mother-in-law. He inquired solicitously:

"And what was the complaint that was responsible for her passing?" To which the man replied in bewilderment, "Complaint? There was no complaint. Everybody around here was satisfied."

A third variation on this theme is the one that goes: "I love mothers-in-law, because I've never had one." Illustrations of this sentiment are:

I never knew my mother-in-law, never met her . . . she died two years before I met my fiancé, now my husband . . . and believe me if all mothers-in-law were as mine, there would be nothing but peace in the world. (Mrs. M., Massachusetts)

A mother-in-law writes from Bangor, Maine, to reinforce avoidance and the stereotyped solution to the in-law problem:

The only safe solution to avoid trouble is for her [mother-in-law] to live solely by herself, where she can put her feet under her own table, eat what and when she deems most suitable, arise with the birds, if so desired, come when she wants to, and go when she gets good and ready. It is wise to make the children a call, but be sure it is not for too long. This is from my own experience. I live alone, and am the happiest mother-in-law in the whole world, and still on friendly terms with all my in-laws.

## **The Avoidance Theme Around the World**

Mother-in-law avoidance is not unique to Americans. It is found literally around the world. In an intensive investigation of the question, George Murdock<sup>1</sup> finds avoidance of the mother-in-law in more than half (57%) of the 250 societies studied in all parts of the world. In another 24% he found a kind of modified avoidance in the form of formal respect toward the mother-in-law.

Decades earlier, Robert Briffault<sup>2</sup> observed that one of the most constant rules in savage society is that a man may not speak to, and generally may not even look upon, the mother of his wife.

Examples of the extremes to which some peoples of the world go in avoiding the mother-in-law are many. Among the northern tribes of Australia at one time a man who spoke to his mother-in-law suffered death; later on the penalty was a reprimand and banishment from the camp.

In New Britain, an island in the South Pacific, if a man is caught accidentally speaking to his mother-in-law, the suicide of one or both would be the only course.

The Yucatan Indians believe that if a man meets his mother-in-law he can never beget children. Men, therefore, take nearly fatal risks to avoid ever meeting their mothers-in-law.

Among the Navahos here in America, mothers-in-law are never supposed to look upon their sons-in-law. Therefore, the mother of the bride does not put in an appearance at the wedding ceremony. If a man looks at his mother-in-law he believes he will go blind. Shouts warning men and their mothers-in-law against accidental meetings are the commonest sounds in a Navaho camp.<sup>3, 4, 5</sup>

In the African Congo, mother-in-law avoidance is still observed after the death of a man's wife.

These few illustrations of the many that have been reported give something of the intensity with which mother-in-law avoidance taboos are held among many of the peoples of the



world. What the origin of these taboos was, is a matter of speculation among various scholars.

Sir J. Lubbock<sup>6</sup> believed that mother-in-law avoidance taboos date back to the indignation of the parents at the son-in-law in the days when marriage by capture was widely practiced.

E. B. Tylor<sup>6</sup> sees mother-in-law taboos as a form of "cutting" by which the mother-in-law rejects her son-in-law as a stranger in the family.

Sigmund Freud and others<sup>1, 6</sup> have suggested that these practices are possible protection against incest in the form of unconscious phantasy temptation. Walter Dyk<sup>3</sup> modifies this hypothesis slightly by proposing that mother-in-law avoidance is an extension of incest taboos from the mother to the mother-in-law.

Margaret Mead<sup>7</sup> offers still another interpretation. She suggests that it is shame in recognition of sexual relationships between the male and female whose marriage relates the in-laws that may be responsible for the avoidance of mother-in-law in many cultures.

Whichever interpretation of the origin of mother-in-law avoidance is preferred, the fundamental fact of the long history of the taboo is universally agreed. With mother-in-law avoidance practiced by the peoples of the world through many generations, it is not surprising to find vestiges of it remaining in contemporary sentiments, expectations, and humor in our own culture.

### **Why Mother-in-Law Jokes, Anyway?**

An experienced anthropologist has added substantial factual support to the hypothesis that in many cultures the joking relationship tends to obtain between relatives standing in potential sexual relationship to each other.<sup>8</sup> Whether this interpretation applies to contemporary mother-in-law jokes in the United States is questionable.

More likely is a simple explanation that enough unpleasant experience with mothers-in-law prevails to keep alive the old taboos against her. Like so many other symbols and practices that continue on long after the original reason for them has disappeared, the mother-in-law stereotype may be a vestige from more primitive times that serves some functions at the same time that it does some disservice in modern society.

A recent analysis of marriage wit<sup>9</sup> revealed that all husband-wife jokes that keep recurring have a core of hostility. In marriage humor, women rather than men are the butt of the hostility humor. Marriage wit, then, can be seen as a conflict tool that functions largely for husbands' purposes. The values that are supported by the marital humor are primarily traditional (the man should be the head of the house, should be in charge of the money and parcel out money to his wife, should not do household chores, and should accept marriage as a necessary evil; while the wife should be submissive, a good cook, and should consider marriage her only means of financial security).

For marriages in which traditional values of this sort no longer operate, and for families in which these traditionally approved practices may no longer be effective, the marriage joke that supports the old outmoded value system is doing a disservice to the marriage, to the husband, and to the wife.

So it seems to be in mother-in-law jokes. They are woven around a core of hostility. They always are directed against the mother-in-law. (Not once in the hundreds of in-law jokes analyzed in this study have we run across a single joke directed against the son-in-law or the daughter-in-law.) Mother-in-law jokes like marriage wit quite possibly support some older value system that may or may not have meaning for modern families. To the extent to which mother-in-law jokes serve to support today's values for American families, they are of service. But, to the extent to which mother-in-law humor creates tensions around outworn values, it is doing more harm than good.



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## Is the Mother-in-Law Stereotype Being Renounced?

EVERYBODY KNOWS mother-in-law jokes. But not everyone thinks they are funny. Many men and women renounce the traditional hostility stereotype against mother-in-law as untrue, unfair, and unfortunate.

Large numbers of people respond to an exploratory study like this by asking to be counted among those who have found the mother-in-law stereotype unsound. They say that in their own experience, mother-in-law does not follow the negative patterns of recurring jokes. They say that not only is the stereotyped hostility untrue, but that it is unfair. It prejudices the young person against his or her mother-in-law. It puts her in an unfortunate light before she ever gets a chance to prove herself a loving ally. It produces unfortunate stresses and strains on the new marriage that are outgrown only through a long process of pleasant experience. Therefore, say these challengers of the mother-in-law mythology, there should be an active campaign to reject hostility-humor as a powerful prejudice that civilized man can ill afford.

Analysis of the several hundred case excerpts in which renunciation of the mother-in-law stereotype is the predominant sentiment reveals several elements.

### **Elements in the Repudiation of the Mother-in-Law Stereotype**

1. Stereotyped hostility against mother-in-law runs through our entire culture, and is exploited in our mass media: press, radio, etc.
2. Negative conditioning against mother-in-law begins early in childhood.
3. Because of the negative set against mother-in-law, many young people anticipate trouble with her when they marry.
4. Anticipation of mother-in-law trouble makes for tension and strain in the relationships of the new family.
5. Mother-in-law must have a great deal of patience to take the prejudice against her.
6. Experience disproves the stereotype and reveals mothers-in-law as "other mothers" in many cases.
7. Learning to love one's mother-in-law is a process often accelerated by crises in the young family in which the mother-in-law is an invaluable aid.
8. Realizing how destructive has been the influence of the stereotype, many men and women actively engage in combating it.
9. Some people believe that accepting mothers-in-law as persons, rather than as a class to be hated, is one mark of civilization in which modern man may differ from his primitive ancestors.

### **They Say It Isn't So**

Men and women from all walks of life call attention to stereotyped mother-in-law hostility in many forms and guises, especially exploited by the comedians of the mass media (radio, television, newspapers, cartoonists). They feel its impact and repudiate it as untrue in ways which the following excerpts illustrate.

An officer stationed at Cherry Point, North Carolina, says:

She's the grizzled old hag of the comic strips,  
The laugh meter buster for radio quips.  
She's mean and demented, a hateful old crow—  
But just for the records, I say "It ain't so!"

**A Montana rancher says:**

I consider the jokes about mothers-in-law most deceiving and mostly untrue. I for one consider my mother-in-law one of the nicest people I have ever known.

The director of an art gallery in Colorado considers a good mother-in-law essential for a good marriage:

Thank you for doing something for the much-maligned mother-in-law! Mine is a peach, and I'm glad for the opportunity to pay her this public tribute. From the outset of my courtship of her daughter, she has been the soul of tact, wisdom, and sympathy.

After the two children arrived, she became doubly important. She was the only grandparent they ever knew, and their lives are tremendously enriched through having the love and warmth of this one grandparent—my mother-in-law.

It is popular to poke fun at mothers-in-law, but a good mother-in-law is a treasure without price. Indeed, I would say that, for a successful marriage, the most important thing, beside a good wife, is a good mother-in-law. And I'm not at all sure which of the two is the more essential!

**An Indiana woman puts her tribute simply:**

Into this dreary old world of worn-out jokes, bitter jibes, and corny soap opera depicting a noble wife battling a fork-tongued old dragon for the right to eat, sleep, and live with her precious son, shines the sunny face of my mother-in-law.

### **Conditioning Against Mother-in-Law Begins Early**

Some men and women are able to trace the conditioning they experienced against mother-in-law throughout their childhood and adolescence. They report that even as children they were indoctrinated against the very concept "mother-in-law" and that this proved to be a disservice to them. They feel that giving young children such a negative set against mother-in-lawhood is unfortunate. Some of them report going to

some lengths with their own children to counteract the effect of the mother-in-law joke so they will recognize it for the popular fallacy it is, and not be too strongly influenced by it. Excerpts from three cases illustrate this element of the stereotype renunciation in our investigation.

A Chicago woman gives a digest of the developmental history of her own sentiments toward mothers-in-law:

I remember hearing my first mother-in-law joke at the age of 8. At that time I couldn't understand too much the meaning of mother-in-law. At 15 I laughed with the others when jokes were made about her. At 17 these jokes were taken for granted like ice cream and pop. When I married at 20 I knew my mother-in-law would be everything I had heard about her.

Imagine my surprise when she turned out to be as nice as *my* mother, as understanding as my father, as loving as my sister, and as humorous as my brother. She was a family combined in one person.

What an injustice the name mother-in-law implies. In 15 years she's given the name mother-in-law the true dignity and honor it really deserves.

A mother in Massachusetts is especially conscious of her responsibility of protecting her children against the evil effects of the traditional set against mother-in-law, when she says:

I do everything I can to keep my sons and daughters from swallowing all the nonsense they hear about how bad mothers-in-law are. We don't laugh at mother-in-law jokes at our house. And I go out of my way to praise my own mother-in-law in the children's presence, so that they will realize how I really feel about her.

Despite all the humor attending the mother-in-law myth, it is vicious and destructive of the good qualities in human beings. It is especially harmful to the children of a family who so early become aware of the negative attitude one is expected to have toward one's in-laws.

That it is a *myth*, I am willing, anxious, and able to testify . . . my own mother-in-law has been as a mother to me: warm, affectionate, helpful, critical when there was need for criticism, but loving at all times. During the sixteen years of my married life our friendship has become ever firmer until now it is unshakable.



## **Mother-in-Law Trouble Is Anticipated Before Marriage**

If everyone recognized the fallacy of the mother-in-law joke, its influence would be slight. But many married men and women report how greatly they were affected by the negative set against mother-in-law, anticipating trouble with her even before they married. The evidence in case analyses is overwhelming in the direction of indicating the potency of the stereotype in giving young people a negative set against their mothers-in-law. Selected verbatim comments from the many persons pointing up this element in stereotype repudiation follow.

Like many a prospective bride, I had qualms about a future mother-in-law and fears that she might turn out like all the others one hears such horrid tales about. But this mother-in-law of mine happens to be a companion, a friend in need with a wonderful sense of humor, and still supplies the love a mother should. (Mrs. V., Cheyenne, Wyo.)

When I was married, I started out hating my mother-in-law with a deep, defiant hatred. It came in part from the mother-in-law tales told me by other brides of my era, and in part from her good cooking which I knew my husband preferred to my toast and soft-boiled eggs.

Then my awakening came in a most amazing way. A bad case of mumps developed in me a month after our marriage. My own parents lived clear across the country, my husband was busy, and I needed nursing badly. My mother-in-law moved in with us, cooked delicious nourishing meals, rubbed my poor aching back, and as I got better read to me.

My resentment of her gradually faded away, and its place was taken up by admiration, gratitude, and love. (Mrs. F., Arizona)

A Connecticut housewife says:

I feel that "in-law" jokes are very unfair for they tend to scare prospective brides. Most married girls I know have been as lucky as I in finding their mothers-in-law are one hundred per cent behind them in working towards a happy marriage.



### Look for Trouble, and You'll Find It

Anticipating trouble with mother-in-law sometimes makes for strains in the new family that might not have occurred if you had not been "all set" for it, say many married persons of both sexes. They tell of attitudes of suspicion against mother-in-law that kept them from recognizing her for what she really was. They report ongoing tensions in early marriage that arose directly out of their preconceived ideas that mother-in-law is a meddlesome troublemaker to be avoided at all costs. They look back after a few months or years of marriage to realize how their own attitudes of looking for trouble with their mothers-in-law was a source of strain in the marriage.

A Brooklyn bridegroom of six months comments, with a mixture of shame and amusement, upon the strains he caused in his marriage because of his preconceived ideas of mothers-in-law:

In the past, somehow I received the impression that all mothers-in-law were she-devils, whose only reason for being on this atomic earth was to spread dissension and bring woe to any man who foolishly courted the devil by marrying one of her children. This impression of course was handed down to me by word of mouth, films, radio, soap operas, the fiction that packs the newsstands, and the human interest story in any daily newspaper or magazine. . . .

So, when I was first married, I was a regular heel. I behaved shamefully toward my mother-in-law, and frequently hurt my wife because of my actions. I remember ducking out the back door when my mother-in-law came in the front. When my wife would call me up from the basement or the garage where I was escaping the visiting "ogre," I would pretend not to hear, and come out only when I was sure the "old devil" had left. My wife might be in tears over my behavior but I pretended not to notice, except to whistle that corny mother-in-law song in noisy braggadocio. If there was a plate of cookies or a fresh baked pie as a gift from my mother-in-law, many's the time when I refused to touch it, bum that I was about the whole business.

But Lo and Behold, after I was married and spent a little time with my mother-in-law, I observed that there was a definite absence of horns on her forehead. I discovered a very human and warm

individual. She wasn't a drunk, a loud mouth, an evil viper set on destroying me and my marriage. In fact she turned out to be a very lovable person and fun to be with.

A resident of Detroit elaborates on the unfairness of the mother-in-law stereotype in getting the young marriage off to a bad start:

A mother-in-law is called upon to fill a most difficult position. Her reputation down through the years has been pretty much that of a mischief-maker and demon in general. So, when the time comes for her to receive her new son-in-law or daughter-in-law as the case may be, already the germs of suspicion and distrust have been planted in the minds of the young people; and no matter how kindly her attitude, or how fine her intentions, there is an atmosphere of distant tolerance, verging on frigidity, difficult for her to cope with.

### **It Takes a Lot of Patience to Be a Mother-in-Law**

With so much hostility against her, a mother-in-law must bear up well to take it comfortably, it seems. It cannot be easy to leave the role of mother where one is loved and cherished and become a mother-in-law where one is avoided and criticized as a cultural expectation. That many mothers-in-law can stand all the barbs directed against them without resentment or retaliation amazes those who contemplate the problem.

Proof that mothers-in-law usually face the stereotype with patience is that they have never developed a parade of son-in-law jokes, or filled the popular thinking with prejudices against daughters-in-law.

These sentiments are evident in several of our cases repudiating the mother-in-law stereotype, as excerpted below:

I think mothers-in-law are pretty wonderful people because they have stood up so long under the deluge of jokes about them. (Mrs. M., Clarksdale, Miss.)

**An Idaho farm woman writes in the same vein:**

Mothers-in-law have a sense of humor. They *must* have. No one but a mother-in-law could bear to listen to the slander which their

sons-in-law put forth against them. Mothers-in-law nowadays simply shrug off all the wisecracks and slams made against them. They try to laugh off the remarks thrown at them. But mothers-in-law, like all people, have a certain limit to which they can endure things. And when they reach this limit, they begin to slump. Their sense of humor has taken all it can take and their patience is at an end. It is then that the sons-in-law begin to pester them again. This is the breaking point. This is the point where most mothers-in-law lose their temper. Now, can you see why mothers-in-law are *unjustly* called "miserable old cranks"?

A Minnesota farm woman comments on the difficulties that face mothers-in-law in overcoming the obstacles of public sentiments about them:

In becoming a mother-in-law, a mother has to leap stilted hurdles that have been put there by foolhardy publicity.

### **Experience Reveals Mothers-in-Law as "Other Mothers"**

For those who are able to see beyond the mother-in-law stereotype, and to learn from their own experience, the mother of the spouse appears as a person in her own right. Many men and women tell of discovering to their surprise that the mother-in-law whom they had so dreaded turned out to be a loyal friend and companion. Sometimes they feel toward her much as they have toward their own mother, until indeed she is their "other mother." When they find in her such a loving source of comfort and support, they are particularly incensed at the injustice of the typical mother-in-law barb. But let some of these people speak for themselves.

A G.I. veteran in a New Jersey city volunteers his happy experience with his mother-in-law in an articulate rejection of the stereotype:

Mothers-in-law have been the butt of innumerable jokes written about them. I admit to laughing at some of these jokes, but that was before I knew what it was to have a mother-in-law. I was led to believe that she was some sort of bugaboo—a veritable dragon.

I have since revised my estimate. Saying I like my mother-in-law would be putting it mildly. I think of her as I would my own mother, because she has been that to me and more. (G.I., New Jersey)

Perhaps I have always resented the general attitude of the majority of people with their unkind criticisms because our family has had the pleasant experience of having mothers-in-law whom we loved and respected. . . . I loved my mother-in-law as if she had been my own mother. (Mrs. E., New Mexico)

An engineer from Louisville, Kentucky, pays this tribute to his mother-in-law in the face of the general injustice of mother-in-law gibes:

Many Americans have come to accept the gibes, taunts, and aspersions attributed to the average mother-in-law as justifiable. There are few greater injustices. I personally feel that my mother-in-law is one of the very best people it has been my pleasure to know. For twenty-five years she has devoted her life to doing those many little things which make me feel that I am accepted as one of her boys.

A woman who lives in a trailer in central Michigan voices the same sentiment, with an elaboration of her personal experience, in finding her mother-in-law a loyal friend even after her divorce:

To have the radio jokesters . . . make out that mothers-in-law are something hateful and despised, and to be gotten rid of as quickly as possible, is very wicked and also at the expense of a woman so branded, because her son and daughter married, and thereby put her in the category of the despised one. One who worked long years, in most cases, and sacrificed much to raise a son or daughter. Then by marriage this devoted one becomes the butt of press and radio jokes—how unjust!!

Last June I divorced my husband and I bought a trailer for myself and boys. Did my husband's mother forsake me for divorcing her son? Indeed, she did *not*!! She offered to give me free parking space in her garden . . . and to pay to have the trailer hauled in. (It is a large Deluxe one and needs a truck to haul it.) She also offered free utilities, and I know the boys would get many free meals as I work and they have to cook their own meals when I am away. They will have Grandmother next door now. . . . I love my mother-in-law.

### **You Can't Help but Love Her When She Sees You Through Your Troubles**

Learning to love one's mother-in-law takes time. It is a process that goes on through living together through real life experi-



ences. When you find your mother-in-law standing back of you, helping you out at every turn, of course you love her for what she has meant to you and your family. It is then that you realize what a false bill of goods you were sold in the mother-in-law joke, and how unfair it is to the fine person and real friend she is. It is in the crises of family life that mother-in-law most effectively gets a chance to prove herself, as many men and women recall vividly in Chapter 6 and in the case excerpt below:

When I married her son more than fourteen years ago, I was possessed with a terrible mother-in-law complex. And try as she would—I never intended her to break through the wall between us. . . .

We lived in a town a hundred miles from her and visited her frequently. But there was always that dread and fear deep inside me really not wanting to be around her. She always introduced me to her friends as "her daughter," and really treated me as such, but never bothering us or our business in any way.

Then about eight years ago my own mother died. My mother-in-law immediately came to our home, doing everything possible to comfort me at a time when I was so bereaved. But before leaving our house on that occasion she came to me and put her arms around me and said, "I know I would never be able to take your mother's place, but I will try to be a mother to you—if you will let me." Then I realized that she knew how I felt.

Since that time I have tried very hard to treat her like a mother. She is still the same, lovable, charming person she has always been. We visited her this past summer and never had a better time. She has a nice home, but she always sees to it that my husband and I are given the best bedroom, meals and lunches and everything we like best.

After so many years, I am trying to be a daughter, since I know it has been very much an "uphill" job to be my mother-in-law. (Mrs. E., Indiana)

### **Active Renunciation of the Destructive Stereotype**

Feeling runs high in both men and women against the destructive influence of the traditional hostility-humor leveled against the mother-in-law. Each in his or her own way seems to be mobilizing resources to combat the unfortunate influence of



the mother-in-law stereotype. The intensity of the emotions aroused can be felt in the variety of verbatim excerpts that follow:

Well, no budding Byron, I—  
Just a big, clumsy ox of a guy,  
With a piece to say  
And a debt to pay;  
So, nuts to the perennial mother-in-law gag—  
It's only aimed at the poor jerk stuck with some old bag!  
(Mr. H., Massachusetts)

A consultant technologist from the Bronx relates his experiences this way:

Mothers-in-law have been the butt of jokes ever since Eve gave away her daughter in marriage; but is she rightfully the harridan and shrew as described? Of course I can not speak for others, but I can certainly speak for myself. I am thankful to my mother-in-law for raising such a fine woman who is now my wife and the mother of my children. My wife lost her father at the tender age of six months, and it was only through my mother-in-law's determined and loving efforts that she raised my wife and sister to adulthood and gave them good educations to boot. My mother-in-law has lived with us close to twelve years; we're married seventeen and one-half years. True we've had our differences, but when I survey all that she has done for us, I forget the petty strifes. My wife is a school teacher and we have three children, so she is not home during the day. Who do you think feeds the children, dresses them, gets them off to school, and performs the multitudinous duties required in a home? Yes, you guessed it—my mother-in-law. Would a maid no matter how faithful do all this and more, regardless of the recompense?

Therefore do you wonder at my sentiments? I could say *much* more, but space limits me. I would probably bore you to tears with a recital of her attributes.

In any event, here's to an end to mother-in-law jokes.

A married woman in a steel mill town is doing what she can to combat the ill effects of the mother-in-law stereotype:

I have appointed myself a committee of one to always say a kind word for a mother-in-law whenever I hear some disparaging remark made. After all, isn't it the point of view that makes the difference? If I can help alter the wrong point of view perhaps the result may bring happiness to a complete family. (Mrs. R., Gary, Ind.)

A woman in rural Vermont rejects the whole in-law reference for what it traditionally connotes to her:

I BOIL when I hear anyone crack a joke or make a sarcastic remark about mothers-in-law. I never use the word—to me, my mother-in-law is “Bill’s Mother” or just “Mother” if I’m talking to her.

A more sophisticated woman from a suburb of New York reflects quite as intense an emotional repudiation of the “proverbial slander” directed against the mother-in-law:

There is no subject on which I can write with greater enthusiasm than my mother-in-law. My love for her may be small defense against the proverbial slander so wrongly directed against her kind. However that may be, my letter is a gesture toward the war which I so honestly believe should be waged against the perpetrators of tittle-tattle, old wives’ tales, and whipping the wind of say-so, to the discomfiture of the in-law relationship.

Because of the never-ceasing poll-parroting about that “ogress,” the mother-in-law, too many young people are apprehensive that “Mother” will want to run their lives, that she will dictate, and want to enforce her way of doing things upon their daily routine. They are constantly afraid she will set one against the other and are suspicious of every conversation behind the back.

Probably nothing in the world is more ridiculous, and certainly no other problem of human relationships is so much in need of freeing from the toils of gags, ill-directed humor, and actual cruelty!

### **Mother-in-Law Jokes Are in Poor Taste**

Analyzing the wealth of material available in which men and women actively renounce the traditional mother-in-law hostility-humor gives one the impression that many moderns consider the old mother-in-law gag to be in poor taste. In much the same way that jokes against members of minority groups have in recent years disappeared from socially sensitive circles, so too the mother-in-law joke is seen by some people as an unfortunate stereotype. At best it calls forth but a prejudiced response. At worst it adversely affects the new marriage with strains and stresses arising directly out of anticipation of trouble with mother-in-law that may be totally unwarranted.

Two brief sentences illustrate this element in repudiation of the mother-in-law stereotype:

To me and many others it is an indication of people becoming more civilized when we hear mothers-in-law praised by the younger generation. (Mrs. C., Texas)

The expressions of disrespect toward mothers-in-law are fast becoming poor taste in society today. (Mrs. H., California)

### **Who Renounces the Mother-in-Law Stereotype?**

When more than three thousand (3,683) persons sent entries for the contest, "Why I Think Mothers-in-Law Are Wonderful People" (CBS, 1952-53), 7% of them (264) expressed as their predominant sentiment their active rejection of the traditional negative attitudes toward mothers-in-law. Many others suggested this sentiment secondarily.

Men repudiated the stereotype of the bad mother-in-law in proportions larger than would have been expected by their numbers in the total group of entrants. Whereas 25% of the total replies were from men, 29.5% of the entries expressing repudiation of the mother-in-law stereotype were submitted by men.

There is some indication that more younger men and women than older persons tend to repudiate traditional mother-in-law avoidance and hostility, although conclusive data are lacking. The trend in this direction, both in group and individual interviews as well as in the content analysis of the contest entries, is consistent. One hypothesis that will bear further investigation is that younger men and women in the United States are more prone to repudiate the traditional sentiments of the folk culture than are those of the older generations.

Both men and women from rural areas respond less frequently with sentiments renouncing the stereotype than do persons from areas with populations over 2,500. Whereas 37% of the total replies were from persons living in communities of under 2,500 population, but 32.6% of the "stereotype

repudiated" replies were from rural areas. Conversely, the majority of replies of this nature (67.4% or 178 of 264) were from localities of 2,500 in population. This is a straight-line relationship by regions (U.S. Census definition) across the country: the higher the percentage of urban replies from a region, the higher the percentage of "stereotype repudiated" sentiments given as the predominant ones, as is seen in tabular form below.

**TABLE 2**  
URBAN PERSONS MORE FREQUENTLY RENOUNCE MOTHER-IN-LAW  
STEREOTYPES

<i>Region</i>	<i>Urban Replies from Region (U.S. Census Definition)</i>		<i>Mother-in-Law Stereotype Repudiated Responses from Region</i>	
	<i>Number</i>	<i>Per Cent</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Per Cent</i>
North East	602	72.9	77	9.3
West	500	68.8	65	9.0
North Central	668	61.1	64	5.9
South	529	50.9	58	5.7
Total U.S.A.	2,299	63.0	264	7.0

These data suggest that traditional mother-in-law avoidance and hostility are less often repudiated in smaller communities than in the urban areas. This is in line with the general observation that traditions are held in greater reverence in rural areas than in larger communities where the break with older ways and sentiments has been facilitated by the processes of mobility, urbanization, and the secularization of life.

It may well be that one of the reasons why the South has the lowest percentage of stereotype-renunciation responses is that this is the region that has significantly fewer urban responses (see Table above). This relationship is one that may merit further investigation with sharper research instruments.

### **The Mother-in-Law Stereotype Is Being Renounced (Summary)**

The verbatim responses of the men and women who express themselves as liking their mothers-in-law and actively

renouncing the old hostility and avoidance sentiments show quite clearly the intensity of these newer sentiments, and suggest some of the personal experiences responsible for the change in attitude. They also indicate the influence of the traditional attitudes about the mother-in-law in the form of expectations of difficulty, and "a set" in the direction of "hating her at first," and "wanting nothing to do with her, until . . ."

We have seen nine of the elements evident in the stereotype repudiation, and in each case have sensed something of the emotional "tune" as well as the words that individual persons use in expressing their renunciation of the traditional sentiments toward mother-in-law.

There is evidence in these data that urban persons more often repudiate the mother-in-law stereotype as untrue, unfair, and unfortunate than those from smaller communities. We also note some indications that these stereotype-repudiating persons are more frequently the younger rather than the older men and women. Both of these tendencies suggest hypotheses for further research.

In general, it is clear that many persons today challenge the old-fashioned mother-in-law joke as outmoded. In a day when good human relations are seen to rest upon an elimination of prejudice, old stereotypes of all kinds are being challenged. The principle has been established of seeing persons for the unique individual each is, rather than discriminating against members of a class bearing a particular label. This factor in family relations may need the same kind of pointing up that has been required in combating the various other forms of group prejudice in society. This is the feeling of an unexpected number of men and women who have participated in this exploration of in-law relationships.



## Parents and Courting Couples

SOME COUPLES TODAY do their courting far from parents of either of the pair. It is becoming usual for young men and women to date whom they will. They may fall in love with real freedom. And it is possible for them to marry whom they will and when they will with very little interference from parents on either side of the family. Today's courtship, engagement, and marriage may take place without even the knowledge of the families of the young people. This complete freedom is something new in courtship customs. In the past it was expected that parents would assume real responsibility for mate selection, courtship behavior, and for the marriage itself.

### Parents Used to Be Active in Courtship

Until recently, parents generally played active roles in the courtship of their grown children. They were expected to protect their growing daughters from the attention of unwelcome or unscrupulous males. Girls were restricted in the boys they might meet, and the friends they might make among members of the other sex. Fathers, mothers, and older brothers took it upon themselves to sort out the less desirable suitors a girl might have by asking two pertinent questions of

any man who began to show interest in the young female in the family.

Question one was, "What are your intentions, young man?" This was designed to weed out those males whose objectives were just to "play around." In the eyes of the family concerned with "marrying off their daughters," the field must be kept clear for the man with matrimony as his intention.

Question two was, "What are your prospects?" This question was extremely important in an earlier age before it was customary for women to work in gainful employment after marriage. Only recently has it been possible for a woman to share economic responsibility for her own livelihood after marriage. In our mothers' and grandmothers' day, a woman was dependent upon her husband for economic support for the rest of her life. So, parents tried to find a man whose financial standing was such that he could support a wife in the style to which she had become (or wanted to become) accustomed. Then a girl "married well" if her husband could afford to establish her at least a little better off money-wise than the level from which she came. If her husband turned out to be a ne'er-do-well, or to be less of a financial success than she may have hoped, her only recourse was to accept her fate, as "she had made her bed, and now must lie upon it"—hard as it might be, was the inference.

Parents used to assume real responsibility in seeing their daughters into marriage. A woman was congratulated for getting her daughters married off early. A man felt his job as father included that of finding suitable husbands for his daughters. Parents who neglected these functions were criticized by the community. And the girls themselves were pitied rather than blamed for their failure to marry, or for their poor choice of mates selected without the active supervision of solicitous parents.

Even after the man was chosen, a girl's courtship was supervised. Chaperonage effectively kept courtship behavior within bounds until close to World War I. But even after that, parents only somewhat less obviously kept an eye on their

daughters who were "keeping company." As long as dating was confined to the "front parlor" or the porch swing, it was not difficult for parents to make their presence felt in well-timed ways.

A grown girl might wonder what it was that tipped off the watchful father or mother as to just when to arrive on the spot with a plate of cookies or a dish of ice cream. From the parents' point of view the answer was simple. When the porch swing stopped squeaking, the wise parent knew that "things might happen" and stepped in with some "love offering" to maintain the status quo.

Today, when most dates are out of the home, it is well nigh impossible for parents to keep tabs on what a courting couple are doing. Within a very few minutes from the girl's front door, the couple are off on their own. Where they go, and what they do, how far they go, and whether they know how to stop, is now pretty much the business of the young persons themselves. So, in most communities parental interference, supervision, or even active interest in courtship is considered old-fashioned.

The change is a big one. It is recognized as a by-product of urbanized, industrialized living. It has come along with the large community where parents cannot be expected to know all those whom their children have met, or to be part of young people's activities. It is inevitable in the widespread use of the automobile among young people for dating and courting. It is part of the newer freedom that assures the rights of the individual to live his own life, make his own friends, and to marry whom and when he will. But, like all changes, it does not come all at once, nor with equal ease to all people.

Many parents today are impelled to be active in the courtship of their children. Some still feel responsible for the selection of their growing children's friends. They become even more active in sorting out eligible possibilities as the child reaches marriageable age. They oppose those of whom they disapprove, and champion those who they feel are appropriate choices. They remain active participants in courting proceed-

ings and continue supervision of the couple's behavior right up to the time of marriage.

### **Parents Sort Out Eligible Possibilities**

Many of the men and women in our study on in-law relationships report the ways in which they were discouraged or encouraged by the parents of the one in whom they were interested, long before they actually married. They give many examples of the ways in which mothers and fathers attempt to influence their children's choices of close friends, lovers and mates. They usually resent being opposed by active parental objections; and they are pleased to feel the approval of their potential "in-laws."

A man who lives in northern Wisconsin speaks for many men when he reports that his mother-in-law strenuously opposed his suit for her daughter's hand and that his dislike for the woman grew out of his resentment of her interference in his efforts to court her daughter. Even though she eventually "came around" to give the couple her blessing before they married, he continues to hold her initial resistance against her, and never has been able to feel that she is or ever could be a real friend of his.

There are men who wax eloquent over the experiences they had with their prospective mothers-in-law during the time when they were courting. These anecdotes are often in the form of ill-natured animadversions in which the mother-in-law-to-be is portrayed in intensely negative ways. Some of these reflections are in the mood of the hostility-humor that characterizes the mother-in-law stereotype as analyzed in Chapter 2. But underneath runs a current of mutual distrust and dislike that has its roots early in the courtship of the couple. An illustration or two will suffice to convey the predominant mood of many of these reports.

A burly Texan hardly sounds like a Southern gentleman when he says:

When I first courted her daughter, she acted towards me as though I were Jack-the-Ripper and Captain Kidd, ready to kidnap her child. In those days I stood in awe of her, but it was excellent training, for when I joined the Army, my tough top sergeant then only seemed like a kindergarten teacher to me.

During the days that preceded my marriage my mother-in-law was a regular Gestapo . . . except that she didn't lay a hand on me. Her words bit into my brain as cruelly as a lash across my face. Her eyes pierced the quick of me as easily as a dagger pierces the flesh. Her dominating manner nauseated me. To be quite frank, I didn't care for my mother-in-law-to-be.

A wag from Brooklyn grimaces as he recalls that during the days he was courting her daughter his mother-in-law told him that the trouble with some people was that they were here today and here tomorrow. It was the same woman who is reported to have told her son-in-law that when he decided to get married, it was the last decision he would ever make.

It is a man in northern Wisconsin who speaks for a large number of men when he says, simply:

She did not appreciate my advances toward her daughter and was not in favor of our marriage, but she did finally give her blessing and we were married.

A man who courted a Southern girl speaks for a number of men in all parts of the country when he reports that his mother-in-law aided him greatly in his courtship by her active encouragement, and that he has always felt close to her because of this initial supporting role in his courtship:

My mother-in-law is my best friend. She aided and abetted me in winning her daughter over to accept me as her Prince Charming. In fact I honestly believe that it was Mother who loved me even before Daughter realized what a lovable fellow I could be. And, it was mutual. I loved this woman who baked such wonderful cakes when she thought I might be coming around. I could sit and talk with her for hours, she was so sweet and understanding. I remember wondering if her daughter would grow up to be as charming and gracious as her mother always was to me. I've never forgotten her sweet acceptance of me as a prospective son-in-law even before I had completely won her daughter to see things my way. She was my strongest ally all through our courtship, and yes, ever since we've



been married, too. But, it all started back when I first started coming around to see the girl I married.

### **Parents Keep an Eye on Courting Couples**

The age of the chaperone may be past, but some mothers keep close tabs on their grown children as they go a-courting. Such close supervision is resented today when so much more freedom in courtship is generally allowed. As in an earlier day, mothers in goodly numbers still keep watch over their daughters; and the visiting men friends squirm under their surveillance today as yesterday. A husband gives his account of one woman's close supervision of her courting daughter that went to lengths reminiscent of another day:

When I was courting my wife, we had to sit on each end of the divan, not that my DEAR mother-in-law was afraid of my kissing her daughter, for she conveniently lost something in the living room and had to look for it every few minutes. There were some peculiar things going on in that house that I never quite figured out. Every Sunday night at exactly 9:00 P.M. the old lady had a spasm of coughing which never ceased until I had said "Goodnight," and then, miraculously, she was all right. I can't figger that out. The day I accidentally held her daughter's hand, Mrs. Johnson congratulated us on our forthcoming marriage.

Another man tells of a courtship interrupted by a mother who was adamant in postponing it in much the same way that was customary in biblical days. Even now, the husband, after years of marriage, still seems amazed that he accepted his prospective mother-in-law's ultimatum so unquestioningly:

When at last it was decided that I should tell the folks of our engagement the mother quietly said to me that she thought it proper that I not see my intended for one year. There was no protest. It was an ultimatum not to be ignored and for a whole year to the day I was banished as completely as though I had been sent to Siberia.

Although it is usually the mother who offends by her too close watch over courting pairs, the father sometimes comes in for amused or resentful criticism. The familiar cartoon of the old man in his night shirt chasing out the visiting swain

is illustrated occasionally in true life histories. One woman married now for some years tells of her embarrassment when her father would appear clad only in pajama bottoms and slippers to wind the mantle clock at bedtime when she was entertaining her boy-friend in the living room. She reports that her father would snap on the ceiling light in the darkened room and pretend astonishment at finding anyone there, when he knew all too well that she and her sweetheart were present. Her husband reports parenthetically that the restraint he felt in knowing the father might pop in on them any moment was a hazard that he both respected and resented all during the courtship.

When the girl's parents supervise the courtship, the couple may react with amusement, resentment, or compliance. But rarely is interference of the boy's parents accepted with anything but bitterness and extreme annoyance. One Iowa farm woman tells a long tale of mother-in-law grievances that began way back in the courtship period when John's mother made a practice of "coming along for the ride" when John took a girl out anywhere:

It started with my first date with John. He came to see me, driving his old model T Ford. He also was bringing his Ma along. She had parked herself in the front seat; as they both weighed two hundred pounds I had to sit in her lap. We went to a picture show and she again parked herself in between us. So we could not even hold hands. After the show we went to the drugstore and she was so sweet to treat us with a ice-cream cone. What a lovely time we had standing there licking our cones. And when we went back home, John took me to the door and his Ma yelled and said for him to hurry up for she was very cold, the poor dear.

### **Parental Interference in Courtship Plans**

The third way in which parents influence courtship is to interfere with the plans the young couple are making for themselves. Oftentimes this comes in the form of persuasion or suggestions for doing things as the parents prefer.

A frequent complaint is that the girl's mother runs the wed-

ding arrangements. Of course this was traditionally her role, so it is understandable if she continues to assume that giving her daughter a good "send-off" in a lovely wedding is her responsibility. Today many couples prefer a small quiet ceremony to an elaborate wedding, and would, if they had a chance, vote for using the money an expensive wedding costs for more practical purposes. But such choices are not always allowed the couple. "The Father of the Bride" pattern is all too common still. In it not only the girl and her bridegroom but all the rest of the family are thrust into a whirlwind of wedding arrangements that no one really wants. In the midst of one such family turmoil, the girl's father offered her five hundred dollars if she would elope. He figured that even so he would be getting off much easier than if the wedding plans were carried through as they were building up.

It is not only in wedding plans that parents interfere. They intrude in many ways during the courtship of the couple, sometimes in helpful ways, and often in ways that annoy one or both members of the about-to-be-married pair. Illustrative is the account given by a serviceman's wife in Maryland, who now after some years of marriage remembers clearly—

The only time I felt a little irked with her was after a few months of marriage, when my husband commented on my diamond. It seems that my intended sent money to his mother to buy my ring as he was on orders for overseas, and she only spent about half of the money he sent. Her reason being that we were young and might change our minds about marriage.

### **More Mothers Than Fathers Interfere in Courtship**

The cartoonist may delight in portraying Father as the one who supervises the courting pair, but in real life it is Mother who more often makes a couple's courtship her business. This exploratory study finds mother overwhelmingly the parent of whom men and women are most critical as a "courtship meddler." Although fathers are mentioned in this connection, it is usually with more amusement than resentment, and with much more patience than is mother's interference.

One reason why women more than men get off on the wrong foot as in-laws in the courtship of their children may be that the traditional position of the father as head of the house continues to give him more acceptance as the person who has a right to influence his children's choices and conduct. This may be the reason why couples tend to be more tolerant of fathers' meddling than mothers' interference in their courtship.

Even more weight can be given a second hypothesis that more women than men actually do interfere in the courtship of their young adult children. Our data show mother significantly more frequently mentioned as the parent who intruded herself in the courtship process. This confirms the findings by Bates,<sup>1</sup> who explored the experiences with parents during the courtship of 136 young married couples. He finds more mothers than fathers actively involved in the courtship of both sons and daughters in the following percentages:

Males:	49.1%	report father attempted to influence courtship
	79.4%	report mother attempted to influence courtship
Females:	68.7%	report father attempted to influence courtship
	97.1%	report mother attempted to influence courtship

The most probable reason why mothers more than fathers continue to try to influence their children's decisions and behavior even up to and through their courtship is that women more than men find it hard to let their children go and grow as independent persons. In our society mothers more than fathers have their children as their primary responsibility throughout childhood. By the time a child reaches adolescence, his mother has a considerable emotional investment in him, and so finds it difficult to release him into full maturity. Fathers, on the other hand, find more of their achievement satisfactions through their work outside their homes, and therefore are not faced with the loss of the main life task as children grow up.

Dr. Levy<sup>2</sup> puts this hazard of the emotional separation of mother and child in particularly vivid way when he says:



No mother ever delivered a child at adolescence with less pain than at the hour of birth. It is impossible to give up without pain a creature which has matured as part of ourselves. . . . I wish I could offer a pain-dispelling drug to mothers at this second birth, this delivery of children into the adult world. Or that I could at least, like a good obstetrician, tell the mothers exactly what to do every step of the way. . . . The real problem of the adolescent revolt is this: a particular kind of love relationship—namely, that of mother and dependent child—is in the process of dissolution. Mother and child are frankly suffering, the mother even more than the child because it is harder for her to find substitutes for her loss.

### **Momism as One Root of In-Law Problems**

Since John Levy's sympathetic realization that it hurts a mother to let her children go as they approach adulthood, many much harsher criticisms have been made of mothers who continue to cling, even after their children are no longer children.

Philip Wylie used the term "Mom" in the derogatory sense of a mother emotionally crippling her male children, in his attack on American mothers in 1942.<sup>3</sup> By the end of World War II, Edward Strecker<sup>4</sup> out of his experience as psychiatrist in Army induction centers corroborated Wylie's indictment, with full documentation, from the many thousands of cases of men who were found to be inadequate emotionally, primarily because they still remained tied to their mothers' apron strings.

Strecker uses the term "Mom" as "a convenient verbal hook upon which to hang an indictment of the woman who has failed in the elementary function of weaning her offspring emotionally as well as physically." (p. 13)

Dr. Strecker describes adequate maternal functioning as simply ". . . mothers of mature men—men who can and are willing to meet life whether it be a civilian or a military life."

Then, in contrast, he points to the multitude of modern men who fail to meet these emotional specifications. "Not so with most of the 500,000 men who tried to evade service to their country—draft dodgers who resorted to any device,



however shameful, even to the wearing of female clothing. Not so with the majority of the 1,825,000 men who were rejected at induction for various neuropsychiatric causes. Not so with a large proportion of the 600,000 more that could not face the prospects of an exacting and unsure military life." (p.18)

As a psychiatrist, Dr. Strecker underlines the fact that "maturity is not an inborn trait; it is not hereditary. It is the result of early background, environment, training, and unselfish parental love." (p. 23)

Today, there is general recognition that "smother love" is crippling in its effect; that the man who is a "Mama's boy" is considerably less than a real He-Man; and that the girl who runs home to Mama is not mature enough to assume the full responsibilities of marriage. Current emphases on emotional maturity arising out of preventive psychiatry, mental hygiene, and the best of family life education have sensitized the public against the mother who continues the functions of motherhood in ongoing interests in her grown children. It is to be expected, therefore, that men and women would be sensitive to a mother's intrusion in their affairs.

Then, too, we have the problem of the vacuum into which a woman steps as soon as her children have grown. Until then her life has been full of their concerns. She has made her children her lifework, as is expected a good mother should in our culture. And then they fall in love and marry, and where does that leave her? To what can she turn with the devotion she has bestowed upon her children for twenty years? Who really needs her now? Her husband is at the peak of his career in a round of busyness that leaves her alone most of the day. The interests she had as a girl before she married have grown stale with years of disuse while the family was growing up. She has no seniority and few salable skills in any jobs that may be near. She finds the expected round of shopping, service stints, and homemaking in an empty house challenging but a fraction of her energies as a woman capable of years of good living yet. Where she goes and what she does with

herself for the next twenty to thirty years is solely up to her; for society as a whole has provided little place for the vigorous mother whose children are no longer in need of her. Is it any wonder that in such circumstances mothers continue to absorb themselves in those whose lives have been their business all along? Until communities find real status for the middle-aged, middle-class woman, we may expect to find many a mother interfering in her children's courtship, marriage, and family life. For Nature abhors a vacuum. And so does Mom.

### **Are Men or Women More Tied to Mother's Apron Strings?**

Now that we have seen some of the bases for mother's clinging to her grown children, the question is appropriate, "Is it men or women who have the greater difficulty establishing their independence as persons?" This question can be argued either way. Evidence supports both the proposition that men have the harder time weaning themselves from their mothers' influence and the hypothesis that it is the girl who finds it harder to find her full autonomy as a person in our society.

Two authorities in recent years have come forth with both points of view for which each has won considerable support. The one is Professor Robert Winch, who believes that it is the man who has the greater problem in breaking loose from his mother. The other is Dr. Mirra Komarovsky who quite as strongly holds the opposite position that the girl faces more hazards in emancipating herself from her parental home.

Winch has been engaged in a series of studies<sup>5-11</sup> designed to discover to what extent a young person's courtship progress is related to his or her attachment to either parent. This investigates the adequacy of the Oedipus-complex theory advanced by Sigmund Freud, in which it is suggested that if the child's attachment to the parent of the opposite sex is not resolved by the time the offspring becomes adult, his relationships with members of the other sex will be disturbed to the point of retarding courtship, mate selection, and marriage.

After nearly a decade of study, Winch concludes that the mother-son relationship is particularly significant, and that failure to achieve emancipation is considerably more conspicuous among sons than daughters. He notes that for the father-daughter relationship, there are no terms to correspond with "the emasculating mother" and "momism." Even though this justifies Freud's theory, in part, Winch demonstrates that the Oedipus complex by itself is insufficient to account for the differences in the relationships of sons and daughters to their parents as seen in three observations of American middle-class families: (1) mother-centered, (2) strong mother-son tie, and (3) greater emancipation expectations for the son than the daughter.<sup>11</sup> (p. 795)

Mirra Komarovsky<sup>12</sup> investigated the problem of the parent-adult married child relationship in terms of sociological role theory rather than in terms of the psychoanalytic concepts. She poses the questions: "Which particular elements of role training in the parental family can be discerned to have by-products which effect later adjustment of the members in their own families of procreation?" and "Which of the two sexes is enabled to make the shift from the parental family to marriage with the minimum of psychological hazards?" (p. 510)

She cites material from family textbooks in current use that deal very inadequately and sketchily with this phase of family relations. She then analyzes 73 autobiographical documents prepared by women undergraduates, and finds: "... parents tended to speed up, most often unwittingly, but also deliberately the emancipation of the boy from the family, while they retarded it in the case of his sister." (p. 510) Three mechanisms through which this is achieved are: (1) Sons are provided with "earlier and more frequent opportunities for independent action"; (2) "A higher degree of privacy in personal affairs is allowed the boys"; and (3) "The *daughters of the family are held to a more exacting code of filial and kinship obligations.*" (p. 511)

The implications of this are: "The major unintended con-

sequences of this greater sheltering of the girl is to create in her such ties to the family of orientation (mother-father-brothers and sisters) that she is handicapped in making the psycho-social shift to the family of procreation (husband-children) which our culture demands." (p. 512)

On the basis of these findings, Dr. Komarovsky suggests that in-law problems in marriage would more frequently involve the wife's parents than the husband's and that in-law tensions might vary with the stage of the family cycle. (p. 516)

Testing these two hypotheses in the current investigation, we find that our data do confirm Dr. Komarovsky's latter suggestion that in-law tensions vary with the stage of the family cycle. Our evidence is that during the early years of marriage in-law problems are most common and most keenly felt. Her other suggestion that in-law problems in marriage more frequently involve the wife's parents than the husband's is not supported by our findings. On the contrary, we find most of our evidence in the direction of the husband's parents being more troublesome than the wife's, with the overwhelming proportion of in-law complaints coming from women rather than from men.

### **Importance of Parental Approval in Engagement Success**

The young married people with whom we talked in collecting data on in-law relationships generally agree that a grown son or daughter *ought* to be able to make his own friends, choose his own mate, and decide questions about his own marriage. They feel strongly that parental interference in dating, courtship, and marriage is regrettable. At the same time, there is a note of realism in their comments, in recognizing the importance of parents' attitudes. In our study we find general agreement that a young man or woman faces more hazards in a marriage of which one or more parents dis-



approve than are present in a union having the blessing of both sets of parents.

These tendencies corroborate the findings of Burgess and Wallin<sup>13</sup> that the opposition of parents to the marriage is closely related to the breaking up of the engagement. In an intensive study of 1,000 engaged couples, this team of workers finds that twice as many engagements break up where one or more parents disapprove the match than where the parents offer no opposition. Specifically they report, "The disapproval of the marriage by one or more parents is associated with two out of five (42.7%) of the broken engagements and only one out of five (21.6%) of the unbroken engagements." (pp. 288-289) Although this does not mean that the parents *caused* the break, the conclusion is that parental opposition is an important factor in the engagements that fail.

### **Age of the Couple Is Related to Parental Interference**

We find that parents tend to be more active both in their opposition and in their support of very young people's courtships, engagements, and marriages than they are in the marriage of older, supposedly more mature young adults of both sexes. We note a strong tendency in our data for parents to be both more frequently criticized and more often appreciated for their support by young people who marry while still in their teens than by those who marry at later ages. This confirms in part the findings of a Florida State University study<sup>14</sup> in which parent-adolescent conflicts were seen to significantly diminish between the time a girl is in high school and her college days. Dating and mate selection were seen to be the areas in which disagreements with both father and mother were most often reported in both periods.

A number of explanations can be offered for these tendencies of parents to be active in young people's involvements in the teens more than in the years that follow. First, is the rational recognition on the part of parents that the adolescent



needs guidance more than the same young person does as he becomes adult. Census data support parents in these beliefs: the marriages of more teen-agers break up than those of later age groups.

Second, is the factor of adolescent rebellion by which some young people dramatically emancipate themselves from their parents. One familiar expression of adolescent revolt is for the youngster to fall in love with and become seriously involved with an "impossible person" from the parents' point of view. It is as though the adolescent were defying the parents by saying in his behavior, "Do you see? I will marry whom I choose, and prove myself no longer under your authority." Parents may be expected to respond with opposition to such a declaration of independence in a way that would not be necessary were the young person's choice more mature, more appropriate, more considered.

Third, is the element of mutual maturity in both parents and their growing and grown children that is closely related to a comfortable interdependence between the generations. Parents on the one hand recognize their offspring as needing to establish their own autonomy, and to live their own lives with a minimum of pressure from their parents; and mature children recognize and respect their parents' interest in their welfare and, no longer having to prove their independence, can accept their parents' attitudes as part of the whole complex of courtship, marriage, and family living. Thus, we would expect more parent-youth conflict during adolescence than when the young people more fully mature.

### **In-Law Problems Anticipated in Courtship**

This chapter shows some of the ways in which in-law problems cast their shadows ahead in the courtship of the pair. We have seen that parents were active in the courting of their sons and especially their daughters in an earlier time. We have evidence to indicate that today some parents still take a hand in sorting out eligible pairs, to the discomfiture of the young

people. We see too that there are parents who today as yesterday supervise the courtships and interfere with courtship and marriage plans of their grown children, to their distress and active resentment. Our evidence is that mothers more than fathers are criticized intruders in courtship. One reason is to be found in the vacuum mothers face in recognizing their children as grown and their work done. The question as to whether it is harder for sons than for daughters to become freed from their mothers' apron strings is one that can be argued in either direction. In our society a boy is expected to be on his own at an earlier age and more completely than is generally true of a girl. Yet, the mother-son tie is such that it is the man's mother who more often becomes the difficult in-law in the life of the young couple. The parents' disapproval of a marriage is an important factor in broken engagements, while parental approval appears to be related to engagement success. Parents are more active in the courtship of young people still in their teens than they are in the dating and mating of their older children, for several reasons that are allied to the changing relationship between the generations as children mature through adolescence into adulthood.

On the basis of the material presented, it might be suggested that the initial approval of the parents in courtship is a factor favorable to good in-law relationships in marriage; and that initial opposition may precede and be predictive of in-law troubles in marriage. Furthermore, it may be suggested that in-law difficulties may be more prevalent in the marriages of very young people than among those well beyond adolescence.

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## Mother-in-Law Roles in Mixed Marriages

MOTHER-IN-LAW ROLES need clarifying. It is a rare woman who knows, when her children marry, what is expected of her as a mother-in-law. She may have attended classes for expectant mothers before her children came. She may have participated actively in mothers' study groups while her children were growing up. She may have kept up to date on her roles as a mother of adolescents. But nowhere can she go to prepare herself for the roles she must play as a mother-in-law when these same children marry and introduce their mates as new adult members in the family circle.

What do young married people and those about to be married know about the roles their mothers-in-law will play in their lives? In courses in preparation for marriage, a small percentage of today's youth learn in some measure what to expect in personal, physical, financial, social, emotional, and homemaking adjustments in marriage. It is a rare course of study, however, that includes anything on the relationship between the married pair and their parents on both sides of the family.

In-laws generally have been subjected to very little research investigation. Scattered items on in-law relationships have been included in a number of marriage studies over the

years: Hamilton,<sup>1</sup> Rockwood and Ford,<sup>2</sup> Landis,<sup>3</sup> Locke,<sup>4</sup> Burgess and Wallin,<sup>5</sup> and Thomas.<sup>6</sup> Thus far, little has been done to pursue the provocative implications of such studies in terms of the ramifications of mother-in-law roles in various types of marriages and family life.

### **Mixed Marriages Are Not Well Understood**

A mixed marriage refers to one that brings together a man and woman from different walks of life. Our participants tend to think of a mixed marriage as one that is (a) interracial, (b) international, (c) interfaith, (d) interclass, or (e) a combination of these.

In a sense, every marriage is a mixed marriage. No one ever marries a carbon copy of himself. Each person marries another whose personality and life style differ in some ways. In general, however, the greater the social distance between the pair, the more mixed the marriage is thought to be, and the more difficult the marriage adjustment.

A number of studies have indicated that mixed marriages are more difficult to build successfully than are marriages of persons within the same culture: Bell,<sup>7</sup> Barron,<sup>8</sup> Murray Lieffer,<sup>9</sup> Landis,<sup>10</sup> and others.

Many hypotheses have been suggested to explain the findings that marriages more often fail outside rather than within the same culture. But to date, little effort has been made to find objective evidence of the validity of any of these attempts to interpret the statistical data.

Study of the mixed marriages that do work out successfully might help to find out what makes them succeed. It would be important to know what kinds of persons can intermarry and make a go of it. Especially challenging is the influence of the parents of the pair in the success or the failure of the mixed marriage. Specifically, is mother-in-law a help or a hindrance in intercultural marriages? What roles does she play in the marriage of one of her children to someone



"not our kind"? is one of the questions upon which some light is thrown by our exploration of in-law relationships.

In these days when thousands of American boys are marrying girls from around the world, a mixed marriage may be interracial, international, interfaith, and intercultural, at one and the same time. This is true of the more than 13,000 G.I. marriages to Japanese girls up to the end of 1953. It is true of many of our cases. Many of these unions are working out successfully in spite of the dire predictions to the contrary. Here, for instance, is a personal account of her experience given by a Hawaiian girl who was able to bridge the differences between her culture and that of her husband, with the acknowledged help of her mother-in-law. Which elements in this case seem to contribute most to the intrafamily harmony that was established?

My husband's people are of German, French-Canadian descent, while I am Hawaiian born and raised in my native land, Honolulu, Hawaii.

In the year of 1944 I left my home in Hawaii just 8 days after my marriage to return to New Mexico to make my home with L's parents until he was able to return.

Not having seen his parents before, I didn't know exactly what to expect, and upon my arrival at their home was most delighted to find a wonderful white haired woman and a smiling man waiting for me with open arms.

I also found a strange house, one I had never seen in my life. It was adobe . . . a house full of warmth and friendliness and a kitchen with all the wonderful aromas of cooking food.

Mom, as I call her, took me right under her wing, gave me friendship, kindness, and love and affection that I was going to need during the lonely months of waiting which were ahead of me.

She was very kind and understanding in every way possible, and made me feel that I was one of them and also that I not only needed them but that they needed me.

They were quite lonely as L was away from home the biggest part of his life, while his married sister lived many miles from them and only occasionally came home to visit with them.

Mom and I grew very close as she and I both realized that it would be probably a good many years before I would ever be able to return home again and see my family. So she was quite determined that she and Dad were going to be my family.

She started in by teaching me all she knew about preserving and canning fruits, vegetables, jellies, etc., which has been my biggest thrill in all these years.

Later after L returned I left and moved to California where he was employed and it was not until August of 1946 that I saw her again.

I returned home to Mom and Dad to await the arrival of my first child, which was to be their first grandchild. During my period of waiting I don't believe anyone had as much care and kindness as I had from Mom. She waited on me hand and foot and even during my last weeks helped me tie my shoe laces as by then I was very plump and could barely stoop over to tie them.

Well, it will be nine years in June that I have been here in the mainland. The years have passed very quickly; I have not yearned too hard for not seeing my own family, as Mom has been my family from the very start.

I have two sons now, the second one being born just ten days after Dad passed away and to my regret that he did not live long enough to see this second grandson.

Mom is now crowding seventy but has all the strength and stamina as when I first saw her. She is very near and dear to me as she has placed me before her own two children.

A year ago we lived fifteen miles away in a little town. We owned a tiny two room house but after the arrival of our second son found we were really crowded and decided if we could sell ours, which was three acres, we could probably buy one in Farmington and be near Mom; as neither one of us had a telephone, I never knew when she was ill. We talked it over with her and went house hunting.

We found a four room adobe house with no bath and no conveniences, except lights but it was 40 acres with 10 acres in fruit, and the house was good and could be improved with a little hard work and patience.

We took her out to see it as we now owned a 1937 Plymouth pickup which was in good running order and at a price we could afford, which was seventy-five dollars.

Mom said "Lambie" which is my pet name she gave me, for reasons unknown to me or maybe cause I jumped from a size 12 outfit to size 18. Anyway she said if that was what I wanted I would be in for many back breaking days and nights but I could have it.

We went to the Agency and Mom bought it for us with her and Dad's money which they had saved together and worked hard for.

We sold our little place at Aztec and are making our payments back to her. Without her help and even with the selling of our place we could not have managed to give a substantial down payment on

this farm we now have; and besides our payments are without interest.

As Mom is living all alone now I have asked her many times to come and live with me and my family but her answer as always is, "No you kids need to live your own lives without me hanging around, but I'll come when I can't stand up. Then you can take care of me."

There is nothing that she won't buy in the line of clothes for my sons and they're spoiled silly, but she can spoil them all she wants to and I wouldn't say a word against it, although many times I am at my wits ends trying to cope with two healthy youngsters.

Whenever there is anything that has to have some kind of decision it's to me that she turns to, and waits for my approval, which makes me feel highly honored.

It is two miles from here to town where she lives and with L working and leaving home at an early hour it leaves me afoot with a baby buggy to push and my older son dragging along side of me. It takes me nearly an hour to get there especially going over a rough and bumpy country road and slush and mud when it snows, but all that is forgotten and made worthwhile when I reach Mom's little house.

She is there smiling and happy waiting for me and the boys with the table laden with good hot food and delicious home-made bread and goodies. (Mrs. L., New Mexico)

The value of studying the actual histories of mixed marriages is not just to get the human interest angle. Nor is it to confirm or to refute the statistical evidence that mixed marriages are more difficult to establish successfully. Rather, clinical and case material offers an opportunity to look at the dynamic factors that make success or failure in marriage, regardless of how "mixed" it is. The first factor to be treated is that of the initial acceptance of the bride into her husband's family. There is evidence that this is a matter of real anxiety to many brides. Fear of not being welcomed as a new member of her husband's family is widespread among the women of our study.

### **Being Accepted by "His" Family Is Important**

Many brides have very real fears about their reception into their husband's family. Some of these apprehensions arise out

of the differences between the two walks of life that the two families represent, with the inevitable anxiety over the other's capacity to assimilate a member of a divergent group.

Before we married, I was scared stiff of meeting my parents-in-law. I was worried because their family and ours were so terribly different.

My husband and I seem to be from two separate worlds. We are of the same faith but I now see that there is nothing else in common. Before marriage when you live in your immediate family surroundings, it is hard to believe that the same customs, ideas, and actions can but exist with the partner chosen for marriage.

My husband believes that his ways of life led in twenty-five years of home life should continue for us, and I tried the past three years living with his family. But it's difficult to live in old-world ideals. . . . (Mrs. I., New York)

A girl does not usually have the same opportunity to know her mother-in-law as a person before she marries, that a boy enjoys who courts his sweetheart in her parents' home. In many cases, brides have no chance to even meet their husband's family before they are married. Such a girl may build up considerable anxiety about her reception in her husband's family. Her fear seems to focus upon her mother-in-law, as we see in this intimate glimpse of one bride's feelings as she goes to meet her:

In 1942, I became a "war bride" and my husband was going overseas. I had never met his family. I dreaded it because my older sister was married and she claimed she had a mother-in-law who was a witch and serpent. But, I promised my husband when he left ten days after we were married, that I would visit his mama. So, I took a bus over—about one hundred miles, and it seemed like a week. I didn't believe I'd ever get there. I kept the snapshot of her that was over ten years old—I guess it was nearly worn out just looking. I arrived on time—the bus was so crowded I waited until it was unloaded, and I could see from the window a little lady, the kindest person I've ever seen; yes, in her hand, too, she had a tiny snapshot of me. Finally I got off the bus. She came over and kissed me and said, "You look like your picture." I laughed and cried with relief—as this only happens in the movies. (Mrs. L., Minnesota)

A girl's fear of first meeting her mother-in-law may arise out of some feelings of guilt and unworthiness. The court-



ship that has been too hurried, or too intense, may leave the girl with some feelings of shame at the extent of her involvement. She is particularly sensitive to the reception she gets from her mother-in-law. If she feels some hesitation in her acceptance, her feelings of unworthiness are confirmed in her mother-in-law's attitudes. But if she is received with open arms, she responds to this full acceptance with a warmth that is real and deep. A scared little girl in a Michigan lumber camp is a good example of initial feelings of unworthiness that made her hesitant of her acceptance. The rest of her story points vividly to what a powerful influence a mother-in-law's complete welcome can mean to a girl who comes to marriage with some questions about herself.

My experience with my mother-in-law began when at the age of 16, I came into her home as the wife of her only son, Tommy, 19 years old. We had met that winter in one of the many lumber camps where Michigan giant pines were being slaughtered. He was a teamster and I was the cook's slavey, unwanted, uncared for and unloved from since babyhood.

I was quick and eager in response to the kindness of this boy from a farm community near the shore of beautiful Lake Michigan.

When camp broke up in the Spring we were married by a Justice of the Peace in a little supply town not far from the camp.

Frightened, awkward, untrained, and pregnant I was accepted by Tommy's mother as a wholly desirable member of the family to be loved and cherished the more because of my previous unhappy experience.

She taught me the things that I needed, so much, to know, to love my Savior and to pray earnestly to Him for guidance. She told me God loved and trusted me very much to give me the divine task of bearing and rearing a child.

When my baby, a beautiful boy, was born in early Winter she welcomed him as joyfully as did Tommy and I. Then an epidemic of whooping cough and measles swept over the little community that Winter and every child who contracted it died. My baby too. Grieving as deeply as we did over the death of her first grandchild, she was the source of greatest comfort to us.

She was the finest and best influence in my life. (Mrs. M., Michigan)



Finally, just because she is a woman, a bride—more than her husband—feels the importance of getting along well with her in-laws. She may feel especially responsible when she comes from a different walk of life, as the wife below illustrates:

I wanted terribly that our marriage be a good one. My folks had tried a mixed marriage and it never worked out. I suppose I was foolish~~er~~ ever to think that I could. But we loved each other so, that I wanted awfully to try. My husband used to laugh off my fears that his family and I would not get along well. He seemed to feel that such things could just be left to chance, and that if we really loved each other everything would work out just fine. But I felt that it was up to me to see to it that his family and I got along. I felt that it was my job as a wife to work out pleasant relationships with his family. But, frankly, I dreaded it. I knew they were different from my folks. I married with the gnawing realization that it was my job to overcome the hazards of our differences by being the loving, wise daughter-in-law that they would be able to accept. It hasn't been easy. We still have our moments. But, it has been worth working on, believe me. (Mrs. A., New York)

We have seen several reasons why girls fear their first meetings with their mothers-in-law: (1) They come from different walks of life; (2) They have a negative set toward mothers-in-law; (3) They have had little chance to know their husband's parents before they marry; (4) They have feelings of guilt, shame, or unworthiness that make them vulnerable; and (5) They assume responsibility for getting along with their in-laws because they feel this is part of the wife's role in marriage. Any or all of these conditions can make a girl anxious about not being fully accepted by the in-law family, especially by her mother-in-law. When the first contact is one of full, overt welcome, the stage is set for happy relationships later.

In reviewing representative cases involving mixed marriages of one kind or another, the first impression is of the wide variety of roles that mothers-in-law play in the marriage of their children to those outside the immediate culture. Just as

there are many kinds of mixed marriages, and an infinite variety of persons who marry, and of mothers whose children marry, so too we find wide variation in the roles that mothers-in-law play in the intercultural unions their children establish.

### **Mother-in-Law Roles in Mixed Marriages**

The variety of mother-in-law roles is especially evident in the early establishment phase of the new marriage. When adult children marry those outside their own group, mothers are found with attitudes toward their children-in-law that go all the way from the most hostile rejection to the warmest acceptance. Including these two extremes in the rejection-acceptance continuum, at least seven roles are well represented in the behavior of the mothers-in-law of our study.

#### **A. Roles in which rejection is the primary factor**

1. Aggressive opposition
2. Active proselyting
3. Persistent resistance
4. Initial resistance gradually lessening as the marriage continues

#### **B. Roles in which acceptance is the primary factor**

5. Resigned acceptance
6. Readiness to explore and accept
7. Active aid in assimilation

1. *Aggressive opposition* is a role that is not frequent among the mothers-in-law in our study, but when it appears it is played with such drama that it cannot be ignored. The clearest case of a mother-in-law's open opposition is that of a woman in southern Illinois whose son was a G.I. in foreign service in World War II. She was visiting her sister's home at the close of the war when she received a telephone call from her son saying that he had arrived home and was waiting for her to come meet the surprise he had brought home—a bride from Australia. At this point, he put his bride on the wire to

receive his mother's greetings. What the girl's mother-in-law delivered instead was an ultimatum that no foreign woman was welcome in her home and that she would not return home until the Australian had left. Thereupon, the mother-in-law punctuated her position with a well-timed heart attack that made rebuttal impossible. Before she had completely recovered, she was sent home where her son and daughter-in-law nursed her through her convalescence. She refused to touch food the daughter-in-law prepared, and openly ridiculed the girl's speech and food habits. She was especially hostile over her daughter-in-law's breakfast request for meat *and* egg, which she attacked as downright extravagance that would not be tolerated in her home. Her opposition was so aggressively persistent that the young couple soon left for the East where they are safely out of sight and sound of it.

2. *Active proselyting* appears in several forms as mothers-in-law reject the new culture that is being introduced into the family, and attempt by direct and devious means to win over the foreign element to their own way of life.

One case illustrating this mother-in-law role is that of a Methodist girl who married her college sweetheart, an avowed agnostic of Jewish ancestry. The young couple gave in to pressure on the part of the bride's mother for a church wedding, but have lived to regret it because of her continued activity in attempting to convert her son-in-law. His mother-in-law's wedding present to him was a Bible inscribed with his name in gold on the cover. Her first invitation to the couple upon their return from their honeymoon was for Sunday morning breakfast, at which she had arranged for the family to go as a unit to church—in a way that could not be refused by the young husband without being rude. She subscribed to *The Christian Home* in her son-in-law's name, so that every month he receives the Methodist periodical. When the young wife announced that she was pregnant, her mother promptly made a christening robe for the baby-to-be. At this the son-in-law blew up and told his mother-in-law in no uncertain terms that her proselyting was unwelcome and that he would

have no more of it. Whereupon the mother-in-law retreated with hurt feelings, only to re-emerge in more subtle ways in her continued efforts to make her son-in-law what he is not and vows he never will be—a devout Methodist.

3. *Persistent resistance* is the role that some mothers-in-law play. One particularly poignant case is that of a Chinese-American woman whose only daughter married a brilliant young missionary's son whose childhood had been spent in China. It was understandable that the two young people would meet on the college campus, and that they would be thrown together by their mutual interest in Chinese culture. Students and faculty soon became accustomed to seeing her black head and his blond one close together at the campus snack shop. But her mother could not accept either the boy or the marriage. She came to their wedding in an old cotton housedress as her symbolic resistance to the ceremony itself. She refused to enter their home when they set up housekeeping in a housing unit on the campus. Even when their first child came, her resistance continued, in a formal politeness that her daughter, her son-in-law, and even her grandson felt as rejection.

4. *Initial resistance* in the mother-in-law sometimes lessens as the marriage continues. Cases of this type are numerous. The mother-in-law starts out playing the role of open resistance, but comes the first Christmas, or the first baby, or both, and she capitulates and takes the young family for her own.

One such mother has spent her life in the mountains of Tennessee. Years ago her only child, an able girl, left home and worked her way through a secondary school for mountain children, and then on through college and graduate school. Her first position was on the staff of a large Midwestern university. There she met and was ardently courted by an attractive graduate student from Lebanon, whose skin was dark and whose religion was Mohammedan. The Tennessee woman's first reaction was one of utter disbelief. That her daughter would marry a "black man" was inconceivable.

The couple was befriended by a liberal fellowship near the



campus, where a wedding ceremony and reception were arranged with elements of both Christian and Moslem traditions. The only member of either family in attendance was the bride's father, who wept openly at the reception and reported simply that his wife could not come. Relations were strained for months, until near the end of the first year a son was born. The happy Arabian father called close friends and relatives to relay the good news. It was on this occasion that he first spoke to his mother-in-law, whose resistance was broken by her interest in her first grandson. Some contact was established then between the two households, which culminated last Christmas with the older woman spending the entire holiday season with her daughter, her grandchild, and with her newly accepted son-in-law.

5. *Resigned acceptance* is seen in many mothers and mothers-in-law who intellectually can let their children go and marry whom they will, but who are none the less unable to mobilize much enthusiasm for their children-in-law. One melting-pot mother is called a one-woman United Nations by her five sons-in-law who are from five different national backgrounds, no one of which is that of their mother-in-law. She shakes her head in bewilderment and asks aloud why not even one of her girls could have married a man of their own kind. But she long since has realized that they must lead their own lives, and that she can not follow them with her ideas or ways.

6. *Readiness to explore* the possibilities of an intercultural union is a role that many mothers-in-law play these days. When her son or daughter falls in love with a member of another culture, she may not like it, but she accepts the reality of the situation to be explored.

Mrs. F. is a case in point. When her son fell in love with a Gentile girl, he knew that his mother would have preferred that he marry a girl of his own Jewish faith. But he knew too that she would never do anything to embarrass his wife or to threaten his marriage. Before the marriage, the girl was accepted as a possible daughter-in-law in the eyes of her sweet-



heart's mother. At the same time it was she who suggested that the young couple talk with both his rabbi and her minister before announcing their engagement. She called upon the girl's family, not in an air of investigation, but rather to get acquainted with them and to let them know her. It was on her initiative that a joint family picnic was arranged well before the marriage so that members of both households would have a chance to know each other as persons. By the time the young couple married, the bride felt that it was her mother-in-law's readiness to accept the union graciously that had made the difference between tension and harmony from the beginning.

7. *Active aid in the assimilation* of a strange daughter-in-law is frequent in the age of the war-bride. Two great world wars, the Korean conflict, and long intervals of military economy have sent American boys just out of school to the far corners of the world. There literally thousands have fallen in love with and have married girls of other nations, races, and places. These brides, traveling on little more than a G.I. allowance check, have arrived alone and lonely on our shores to be met and mothered in countless cases by their mothers-in-law. Multitudes of these girls are most appreciative of the roles their mothers-in-law have played in helping them become good American wives and mothers. Just a few selected excerpts from their verbatim accounts of their experiences clearly indicate the roles mothers-in-law play in the acculturation and active assimilation of their sons' wives.

A French war-bride speaks appreciatively of the way that her mother-in-law has bridged over the lonely years of her husband's absence in military service, first in World War II, and then in Korea:

Mother-in-law has taken my family's place since I left France as a war bride in 1945. She has replaced my mother, acting towards me just like a mother would, even to the scolding and encouraging. Helping me to get used to a new world and a new kind of life, loving my children dearly, she has opened up her house since my husband went overseas and is, even now, doing her best to help me through

a bad time caused by the absence of news from my husband, her son, now in Korea. (Mrs. D., Wyoming)

From a farm in Mississippi comes a tribute to a mother-in-law who helped a war-bride from the British West Indies learn what it means to become a wife and mother in the States:

I am a war bride from the British West Indies who lost her own mother at an early age and then married an American soldier from a farm family and an entirely different kind of life from the kind I was brought up to.

If it wasn't for my mother-in-law I don't know what I would have done. It was she who taught me how to cook and keep house and saw me through three babies and showed such understanding in many difficult situations. My own mother couldn't have been kinder to me. (Mrs. C., Mississippi)

A girl from "down under" in Australia rises out of her personal experience with husband's mother here in the States, to repudiate the "awful spectre"—mother-in-law:

I am a War Bride from Australia, and came here in 1944 to start my married life in a strange country. For a little while I felt kind of lost and alone—but not for long. My Mother-in-law took me into her heart and it wasn't long till I was entirely at ease with my new family. Now I think of her not as Mother-in-law, but as a real Mother, for while she can never take the place of my own Mother in Australia, still she occupies a special spot in my heart, where the awful spectre—Mother-in-law—could certainly never fit. (Mrs. L., Minnesota)

One final verbatim account is detailed not only for the role the mother-in-law played in assimilating the outsider her son married, but also for the attitudes on the daughter-in-law's part that made the mother-in-law's role effective:

When I was a "Flapper" after World War I, I married a handsome veteran with a local reputation for being a hero somewhere in France when one of his buddies was wounded. (He is so taciturn I've never learned to this day whether it was true or not.)

My soldier had a good reason to be taciturn; he was English on his father's side and his mother was from many generations of Ozark Mountain folk and had never lived anywhere except among her mountaineer people. My family was in the mountains on a long

vacation when I met this handsome soldier and we fell in love at once. I told myself, "He is a mountaineer but he is different. He has been around and he's keen. He is always poised and I'll be proud of him. I'll get him out of these hills. We don't have to live around his people."

When he asked me to go to the northern part of Arkansas to spend a week-end with his family I went more out of curiosity than interest; I went with the intention of making them understand that I was different, so instead of dressing suitably I wore my most beautifully tailored navy suit with extremely high heel navy shoes (navy or colored shoes, except pearl gray were not common then) and other accessories to match or contrast, just right. I didn't give a thought to how uncomfortable George would be to have me overdressed. He didn't say a word but I know he must have been shocked at my appearance, for he and I had hiked and ridden horseback over many hills and spent many, many hours rowing, wading, and swimming in mountain streams, in the roughest clothes. He didn't even know I had clothes that were the cream of the Texas shops.

Neither did his quiet, plainly dressed little mother know it. As we walked from the yard-gate up to her porch steps, four miles out in the Ozark Hills from the little country station, she was looking at my face, only! By the time we were up the steps she had risen from the rough chair and said, "Come in." and "How are you, George?" No kiss for her son and no handshake for this woman he had brought in.

Two young sisters and two young brothers had vanished from the porch as we entered the big, severe, scrubbed living room and she paid no more attention than if they had been her shadows. Without invitation I followed her into the "front room" bedroom. She put my bag on the bed and left the only chair vacant. Looking steadily into my eyes again she told me to take my "things" off. "I'll be in the kitchen," she said, and left me. I knew she had seen through to the very core of my small intentions and as if that were not enough I heard peals of merriment out in the yard beside my window and there was the youngest brother, a regular Leroy Gildersleeve, walking on homemade stilts with his cap pulled down over his head like my smart little cloche and the youngest sister countering his stunt by pulling her skirts tightly around her little hips and twisting about on her toes to show that she could do it better. They were laughing at my appearance! They were mimicking me! And, they wanted me to know it!

I do not know whether I hated them or myself most but I had been a teacher long enough to know better than to run from children so I stood and looked at them until I was discovered and then

they ran. Then I went into the big scrubbed kitchen that did not have a single modern convenience, but it was a good place to work and there was plenty to do to finish up a big meal for a big family and I had a major in Home Economics. Some shred of grace, and a desire to know this old woman with enviable wavy hair and small gnarled hands and feet and a brood of young children as well as a handsome son thirty years old, rescued me from my despicable smallness. I walked into the kitchen, saw an apron behind the door on a nail, tied it on and joined the little old mountain woman in doing the things women the world over do for their families. And, to my surprise she did not remonstrate. Then I understood that she considered I was doing no more nor less than my duty and as such she accepted it.

She was the quietest person I ever knew but she told me to grate a little "nutteneegg" over the egg custards before I put them in the oven because that was what George liked. Later, when I had taken up the last of the fried chicken and she was pinching off balls of soft, soft dough with her fingers and molding them into big biscuits, she told me to make the gravy with water, not milk. "That's the way Hugh likes it," she explained. There was no chatting, just quiet, matter-of-fact explanations, but by the time that meal was ready to serve I realized that George's mother was a fine, unselfish, loving woman who wanted to be my friend but that she also expected me to be a real woman. What I wore, where I came from nor my background had exactly nothing to do with it. She had her way of knowing a woman, as every good mother has, and a woman was a woman, "for a' that."

When bad little Hugh asked for more gravy at supper she said, "I guess Texas women make the same kind as Arkansas women, don't you?" Hugh blushed furiously and rolled his eyes to look at me. I grinned at him and we were friends. When George complimented her custards she told him I had finished them up and flavored them; nothing cloying or flattering, just simple unadorned truths. Here was a woman I could depend upon.

And I depended upon her for a quarter of a century. Every day of that time I WANTED her love and respect and I tried to earn it. I did. We were as different as two women could be but she defended my beloved smart clothes by saying, "I'd be silly to try to dress like she does and she would be just as crazy to dress like I do." She had a high stack of quilts on a big chest that was filled with others, in my bedroom. They were beautiful beyond words. "Take what you want," she said. "But I could never help you make one to replace it. I never quilted; there was never quilting done in our home," I protested.



Without a gooey smile, still matter-of-fact, she said, "I don't want you to help me make any. I always give my children, when they start housekeeping, enough quilts to 'make-up' two beds." I was overwhelmed with the eight she made me select and somehow I felt inefficient to repeat that I could not make a quilt. But she said that all women did not need to make quilts. "I know you can do a lot of things I can't do," she reassured me. That was also a simple fact. (Mrs. G., Texas)

### Roles Are Reciprocal

The Arkansas mother-in-law in the case above could not have played her role of quiet acceptance so effectively had not her daughter-in-law been insightfully mature enough herself to encourage it. And so it is with the other roles that mothers-in-law play. They are often in response to roles being played by the others in the situation. Even the most rejecting mother-in-law (1. Aggressive Opposition case) was first rejected by her son who after months of silence "surprised" his mother with a marriage and a strange daughter-in-law. The Tennessee mountain girl had run away from home years before her marriage to her Arabian sweetheart. So, in a real way her mother's resistance was not only to the marriage and the dark-skinned bridegroom but to the years of being repudiated along with her culture by her "uppity" daughter.

There is evidence that mothers-in-law are frequently cast into roles that are quite uncomfortable for them. The clearest illustration is that of the role of scapegoat thrust upon so many mothers-in-law. The phenomenon seems to be that the mother-in-law becomes a convenient target for the in-law child's hostility. That this is culturally acceptable in the very nature of the mother-in-law stereotype does not lessen its burden. A considerable number of mothers-in-law report that they never can do anything that will please the children-in-law.

There is a clear indication that while mothers-in-law are generally criticized by their married children and their mates,



they only rarely complain of their children-in-law. (Chapter 8) This suggests the role of patient long-sufferance as one that mothers-in-law are expected to play in our culture.

One factor common to mother-in-law roles involving acceptance is mutual respect between the generations. When mother-in-law is respected and appreciated as a person, she tends to accept her children-in-law. When she has been repudiated by her grown children, or threatened by her children-in-law, her reaction is often that of rejection. Similarly, when the children-in-law are respected and accepted, they appreciate their parents-in-law as their own.

A second factor that affects the roles of both mother-in-law and children-in-law is the maturity of the persons. As a mother is mature enough to release her grown children into full interdependence, she can accept their marriages without the clinging dependence that less mature women suffer. As young people become mature enough to see through the traditional stereotypes to the real persons their mothers-in-law are, they act in ways that are mutually satisfying.

We have reviewed what thousands of married men and women say about their marriages and their in-laws. These cases reveal all kinds of "differences," a wide variety of attitudes, and many degrees of success. We find that the role played by the mother-in-law in the mixed marriage of her children is a significant factor in both the success of the marriage and the harmony between the generations.

In general, we find that the initial acceptance of the newcomer in the family is anxiously desired and warmly welcomed. At the same time, we have uncovered a variety of roles that mothers-in-law play in their assimilation of their children-in-law. We find that these roles are reciprocal, and mutual, and that in a real sense in-law acceptance is a two-way process. The factors of mutual respect and maturity are recognized as of especial importance in the success of mixed marriages.

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## Mother-in-Law as a Mother

MANY PEOPLE love their mothers-in-law. They appreciate all she does for them as a mother would. Some realize that were it not for her mothering, they would not have the one they married.

Half (1,853; 51%) of all the men and women who volunteered statements about their mothers-in-law said substantially that they like her because she is a mother in some real sense. This is the total of three similar categories of predominant sentiments expressed by all respondents in the mother-in-law contest. (See first four lines of Table 3 below).

TABLE 3

PREDOMINANT SENTIMENTS IN 3,683 LETTERS ON THE THEME,  
"WHY I THINK MOTHERS-IN-LAW ARE WONDERFUL PEOPLE"

<i>Predominant Sentiment</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>Per Cent</i>
Appreciate her gifts and services	830	23
Love her like a mother	540	15
She reared my spouse	483	13
Mother-in-law as a mother (sub-total)	1,853	51
Appreciate her as a person	913	25
Hostility-humor stereotyped jokes	216	6
Avoidance	80	2
Stereotyped hostility-avoidance jokes (sub-total)	296	8
Stereotype is unfair	264	7
Ego (by mothers-in-law)	193	5
Children's grandmother	48	1
Others (illegible, incoherent, irrelevant)	116	3
Total response	3,683	100

Many men and women do not mind being mothered by their mothers-in-law. We find, as did Sussman,<sup>1</sup> that in many ways the older generation helps out the younger when children marry. The majority of our cases spell out in considerable detail all that mothers-in-law do in continuing to function as mothers after their children have married. Men quite as often as women say they appreciate what their mothers-in-law do for them (22.6% of the men, and 22.4% of the women). Gifts and services from the mother-in-law are mentioned more frequently by men and women who live in rural areas than by those who are in cities, possibly because patterns of mutual assistance are more generally accepted among farm people. Persons in all parts of the nation agree that there are times when it is good to be mothered, in the many individual ways that are summarized in the sections that follow.

### **She Taught Me, a Young Bride, What I Needed to Know**

Now when many girls marry at young ages, there seems to be a place for a "second mother" in tutoring the bride in the ways of homemaking. Public opinion has it that brides resent mother-in-law's "interference." But many of our cases indicate that young brides frequently appreciate the way in which their mothers-in-law stand by while they learn the fundamentals of becoming a good wife and mother. How to cook, and sew, and take care of babies, and be a gracious hostess are the basic elementals that many a young bride learns at her mother-in-law's elbow.

She taught me how to sew, can, and cook, and let me say this for her, that, although I can cook a good meal, I'll never be able to give that certain taste that she does to her cooking.

When my babies were born my mother-in-law always came to my aid and told me how to bathe and to care for them in every way. I didn't resent this for I was ignorant about the ways to care for a tiny baby. I soon learned. (Mrs. L., Tennessee)

I was a Yankee stranger to my mother-in-law, but I called her "Mom" from the first—and we've never had a cross word in nine

years. I married in my teens and when we moved near them, she taught me how to cook Southern dishes, how to can vegetables, (I had never canned in my life) and she helped with the washing and sewing. She also smoothed over the first scared moments of tending to the new baby. She always had an answer when "what to do next" came up. Granny's experience with seven children isn't far out of place in modern times. All seven children practically live within "hollerin'" distance, so we have many family outings and reunions. Most, if not all of them are home every Sunday. Her health isn't too good now, but Mom's still there when we need her. She keeps the children occasionally, and there's always a dish of the first snap beans and corn in spring or the last tomatoes in fall. Even the loving wife can't cook string beans "like mother used to." I used to tell hubby if anything went wrong, I'd go home to *his* mother! She has always made me feel as if I were her own daughter. I haven't been back North to see my relatives in seven years (next summer looks promising), and when people ask how I can stand it, I know I never could if it weren't for those wonderful in-laws who are now "my family." I certainly acquired a 14K set of them along with the gold band. No matter what they say, one marries the in-laws too, when one marries, but I can truthfully say: "*His people are my people.*" (Mrs. C., North Carolina)

Frankly, it seems incredible that a year ago I was at odds with the world and my husband because I didn't like going to parties or being a gracious hostess. Then a miracle happened. My mother-in-law had to live with us—Oh my gosh!

I resented her terribly at first but each day her continued congenial, cheerful friendship began to contribute immeasurably to the tiny sunny side of my disposition until, today, my genuine hospitality and refinement of living has accomplished the ultimate.

I credit my mother-in-law that I'm now the happy, loving and much loved center of my universe. (Mrs. C., Missouri)

Beyond the skills and arts of homemaking are the basic attitudes toward people that can make or break the spirit of a home. These fundamental feelings about life can be learned from the example of a good mother-in-law, report other brides:

We owe our happy marriage to her. From the moment we said "I do" she has been beside us, giving us guidance and understanding. It must have terrified her, that her son married such a young, selfish, scatterbrained girl. But never once did she show it. When others



criticized us, she told them to let us alone. We always knew that she was on our side.

She showed me that just housekeeping was not enough—that there were more important things than a spotless house. That it takes more than a house to make a home. She taught me the meaning of hospitality—to throw wide the door and put on the coffee pot. She taught me to look past people's faces and into their hearts. She taught me to see good in everyone. (Mrs. L., Washington)

I was married young and my knowledge of cooking was very limited. As soon as we were settled I invited my husband's parents to dinner. My husband had told me that custard pie was his father's favorite dessert so I decided to try making one.

Upon arriving, my mother-in-law came to the kitchen offering her help. As I heard my husband telling his father we were having custard pie, I was reminded it was time to take it from the oven. I opened the oven door to gaze at my masterpiece and nearly fainted. The crust was floating around on top of the custard. No one had told me not to prick the crust of a custard pie. One look at the pie and at my face told my mother-in-law what had happened. As I heard my husband and his father approaching the kitchen to see how dinner was coming I was frantic.

Before I realized what was happening my mother-in-law grasped the pie from the oven and the next thing I knew it was upside down on the floor. She apologized to great length on her clumsiness, but only she and I knew it was no accident.

My husband, all sympathy for me, dashed out and came back with ice cream for dessert. Thanks to my mother-in-law my first dinner party was a success.

Her understanding then, and in all the years since, has made me truly love her. (Mrs. D., Wisconsin)

A bride can often accept help in her training as a homemaker from her mother-in-law more comfortably than from her own mother. With her own mother, she is the child in their common experience; while, with her husband's mother, she starts out as a young adult. She appreciates the respect she receives from her mother-in-law as an adult. Her eagerness to please her husband leads her to her mother-in-law, who can advise her of his likes and dislikes. This is not only mutually motivating but helps both women to maintain prestige. In fact, there seems to arise a pleasant sense of conspiracy-

of-women when bride and mother-in-law join forces in their mutual concern for the welfare of the man whose love they share.

### **Mother-in-Law Gives Us What She Can**

My Mother-in-Law is named Min  
She's generous, she's kind, and she's thin,  
When I need a five  
Why land sakes alive  
She just digs down in her jeans for a fin.  
(Mr. L., Nevada)

The limerick above is in the spirit of a considerable number of the human documents at hand. The mother-in-law's financial assistance to the young couple is appreciated, but the expression of gratitude often is in humorous vein. Quite possibly this jesting is an indication of the embarrassment young married people feel in accepting help from either of their parents once they themselves are married. There is in America today an expectation that young adults should be completely independent of their parents when they marry. This is unreasonable, especially at a time when so many marry so young, when they still have their education to complete, and before they are vocationally established. So they do accept help from their parents, one set of which is by definition "in-laws" to one of the couple. The help is appreciated, but the embarrassment at not coming up to cultural expectations of financial independence masks the gratitude in humor.

Not all mothers-in-law are in a position to help their married children financially. But that does not keep them from generously sharing of what they do have with their children's families. Two picturesque examples are selected from many available to illustrate the point:

We didn't go on a honeymoon like most folks do—for we didn't have enough money and we wanted to get out to ourselves. So we just went to buying our furniture. We lived with his mother for six weeks and she was so good to us. She helped me get us a few vegetables canned and a few jars of fruit. Then when we got ready

to move, she gave us eight nice quilts, and about five or six good laying hens, besides some kitchen utensils and curtains. I thought that was mighty good of her, and I'll never forget her for it. We didn't get a household shower either like most folks do—so what she and my parents gave us sure was a help. Since then she has given us four more pretty quilt tops and linings for them. And beautiful crochet doilies that she herself made, table cloths, scarfs, and many other useful items like that.

I didn't tell you this at first. But she is crippled, and has been since she was real small. (Mrs. E., Mississippi)

She was a little old German lady, that came to this country when my husband was eight years old. Years later when we were married my husband logged in Northern Wisconsin. Every time he needed more men he'd go down to Green Bay and the surrounding country to get farmers who worked in the woods in the winter time.

One time he went down and stayed over night at his mother's. She asked him if I had woolen stockings; he said no, so she sat up all night and knitted me a pair for him to bring back so I wouldn't get rheumatism. In the fall the best apples were picked and sent to me because she knew I loved apples. (Mrs. M., Wisconsin)

### **Mother-in-Law Was Right There When Our Baby Came**

One of the common ways in which the mother-in-law helps her married children and their mates is when a new baby comes into the family. It is then that she can usually be counted on to come and keep house while the new mother is confined, and then pitch into the round of baby-care, nursing, and all that it takes to keep the home of a newborn running smoothly. That these services are warmly appreciated, especially by their daughters-in-law, is evident in these short excerpts taken from a few of our many family documents. As one young mother puts it:

When our daughter was born, who but mom-in-law would have come and stayed to cook, clean, care for a baby and mother, keep a household running smoothly, and yet have unbounded love and sheer joy in the doing of all this? Through the years those skillful and willing hands have made baby clothes, little girl clothes—party clothes, dolls and all things dear to the hearts of little girls. (Mrs. M., Indiana)

Even when the mother-in-law is personally inconvenienced by these lying-in services, she still is right there when she is needed. A number of cases reveal that the mother-in-law leaves her business or takes a leave of absence from her work in order to rush to her son's home at the time of the birth of one of her grandchildren. Two illustrations of this type of devotion follow:

Last month we added a daughter to our family and we asked Tom's Mom to lend us a helping hand for a while. She immediately took a month's leave of absence from her work and home duties, to give us her time during the busiest month of everyone's life—the Holiday Season.

Upon my return home, I found my husband and son perfectly taken care of, my house in its usual order and all kinds of baked goodies for the Holidays. In addition, she had diminished my mending to almost nothing, a basket which is always full, and yet found time each day, to walk over to the hospital and lift my boy up to the window so that I might see him. You can imagine the pleasure that that added to my day. . . . (Mrs. T., Indiana)

Until recently my husband and I lived hundreds of miles from both our families. We ironed out all our problems alone; sometimes it was hard, but we didn't ask either side for an opinion. As it would happen, we had several serious illnesses with our child and with my husband too. My mother-in-law never failed to hurry to me and to stand by my side through thick and thin. When my child was born my own mother could not be with me and although my mother-in-law, who is in business for herself and finds it hard to get away, was at that time needed at home she came to me and saw me through it all. (Mrs. J., Illinois)

Several cases seem to indicate that the daughter-in-law's initial resentment of her mother-in-law melts in the warmth of the older woman's attention at such times as the coming of a new child into the family. The following is an example:

My husband and I have been married five and a half years. At first I resented my mother-in-law.

Our first baby was born a year after we were married. She came five hundred miles to help care for me and the baby. When our second baby came we were living close to her so she helped again. When our oldest baby was three, he died of heart trouble. Eleven



months later we had our third baby and she stayed right by me till the baby came. It only lived twenty-two hours. I was very ill for days. She sat by me day and night. My mother was so far away it was impossible for her to come to be with me. When I called out for "mom" my mother-in-law was by me. . . . (Mrs. L., Kansas)

### **She Nursed Us Through Illness in the Family**

Many young families think of their mothers and mothers-in-law as "angels of mercy" when sickness strikes. What to do before the doctor comes is to "Call Mom" in many homes. It is mother-in-law who comes and waits on the sick, and takes care of the well who might otherwise be neglected during the illness in the family. As one married woman described her mother-in-law's role through the years:

I was married to her son for 10 happy years and she always treated me like her own daughter. Many a time she left her own work, to come and wait on us, when we had illness in our home. My two sons always felt better soon as Grandmother came over to wait on them, or hold them in her comfortable lap. When my husband took sick and after he died she took care of my boys so I could go to work. Now that I remarried she treats my husband like her own son and calls our little boy her grandson. (Mrs. L., Illinois)

That sometimes it wasn't easy for the mother-in-law to take on nursing responsibilities in addition to her regular tasks is vividly portrayed in the following word-picture:

I never really knew her well until Leroy and I were married about five months. I guess it was fate that made me realize that I had such a swell mother-in-law. My husband and I had had an automobile wreck and I broke my leg. After I got out of the hospital two weeks later she welcomed Leroy and me to her house and was also willing to care for me until I was mended back together again. Believe me it was no picnic for her either. She is the mother of twelve children, six at home, and all school age too. She had a lot to do and sometimes I made it unbearable for her too. I was going to have a baby. In a cast up to my waist, gosh I was awful hard to get along with. Every morning she would get her kids off to school and then fix breakfast for her husband. After he went to work, she prepared breakfast for me, gave me a bath, and started on her housework. Each week she would do two washings and ironings. She was won-



derful to me. She did all her work and never said one word about being tired, although I knew she was. My mother-in-law weighs over two hundred pounds and is about 5' 2" tall. She took care of me for three months and I could never have had better care in a hospital. In my opinion my mother-in-law is the best mother-in-law any girl could have. . . . (Mrs. L., Indiana)

### **She Stood By Through Our Troubles**

Many families would be cases in the files of social agencies were it not for the way in which mothers and mothers-in-law step in and see their married children through recurring family crises. That mother-in-law's help is appreciated in times of trouble is evident in the very way the story of family crisis after crisis is told. Hospitalization, disability, and impaired employment form a crisis complex illustrated by this case:

My husband and I got married when I was just past sixteen and he was twenty-six. We've been married for twenty months and have a little boy six months which we are very proud of.

During the year of '49, my husband was in a motorcycle accident. His buddy was killed that was with him. My husband was in the hospital for quite a while with a broken leg—contusions and an arm with all the nerves dead. Later he got the arm amputated. Now he wears an artificial one.

He worked with his father doing general construction, as foreman, but the work got slow and there wasn't enough money in it for two families. He decided to try and find another job. It didn't matter what the pay was, but, just enough to live on.

We couldn't afford a place to live so we went to live with his folks.

About three months afterwards I got pregnant. There we were. We didn't have any money at all, just \$60 that my husband was getting as a pension.

My husband looked and looked for a job, but couldn't get one because of his disability.

My mother-in-law bought most of the babies' clothes and all of mine. I was sick off and on during those months, but she nursed me and took extra good care of me.

Later my husband's mother and father bought us a grocery store. He and his mother worked in the store, in order to save from paying others.

His mother gave us a baby robe, play pen, bed, and stroller for the baby. We would have bought them ourselves but most of our customers at the store would not pay their bills, and we had no way of getting the money.

After the baby was born my mother-in-law kept him, while I helped my husband. Finally after going broke we closed it up.

At this time we had to get a place to live. So on \$60 a month, we rented an apartment and my husband's mother and father furnished it for us. (Mrs. L., Louisiana)

If it isn't accidental disability and unemployment, it may be fire and hospitalization, but you can count on mother-in-law to cushion the blow of the family trouble, whatever it is, the Emersons have discovered:

I have been married for ten years, and ever since I have known her she is constantly trying to help someone. We have had to move in with her twice for a period of a month each time. Once when we had to wait for a house to be available to rent, and another time when our home was damaged by fire. Both times her only thought was for our happiness, and never of the inconvenience our family of four caused her.

The most wonderful thing she has done for us was two years ago when our third son arrived. I suddenly developed a severe case of uremic poisoning, and had to be rushed to the hospital. Gene went after her to come and stay with our other two small boys. She now loves to laugh and tell about the time her dirty lunch dishes stayed right on the table for six weeks until she could return home from our place. My doctor could hardly believe how quickly I regained health, but I know it was her wonderful care of the boys and myself, and the presence of her cheerful disposition.

Bereavement usually brings a mother-in-law in to help the remaining members of the family get back on their feet. As this young widow says:

. . . several years ago my husband died leaving me with a nine-month old daughter and a young son to support. She immediately came to my side, and, brushing away her own sorrow, helped me to pack and move to the middle west. I had no home to go to and she put us up for the summer while I looked for a job. The only place I could get a job was 100 miles from where my mother-in-law lived and the salary was not large enough to pay for rent, food, clothes, and the hiring of a woman to take care of the children. She kept the

children at her home until they were old enough to go to school and did not require additional help in the home. Her constant love and help was an inspiration to all of us. (Mrs. R., Wisconsin)

Quite possibly it is this willingness to come to the aid of their young families during periods of crisis that helps some families weather their troubles so much better than others. And it is clear that during periods of stress and strain, in which young families are especially vulnerable, the continuing support from parents and parents-in-law tends to dissipate the traditional mother-in-law hostility stereotypes. The repudiation of the mother-in-law mythology through actual experience with her invaluable aid is clearly evident in our cases. (Chapter 3)

### **She Saw Us Through Military Service**

The mobilization of millions of young men of marriageable age brings many family crises in its wake. The withdrawal of the young husband and/or father from his loved ones makes him anxious for their welfare, and often necessitates others taking his role as provider and protector. It is then that mother-in-law often serves as a home base for the little rootless family, supports them emotionally as well as financially, nurses them through illness, and gives the son or son-in-law in military service the assurance that all is well at home.

War weddings are sometimes hastily contrived affairs, put together in a few hours to take advantage of a military leave or furlough. What a girl cannot do herself in making the wedding preparations that mean so much to the young bride is often done by her mother-in-law, as the case excerpt below illustrates:

Eighteen months ago I married her eldest son, who is serving with Uncle Sam's Navy, in one of these quicky marriages on a short leave. I was employed in a small town bank and it was next to impossible to get time off to plan and shop for a wedding. My mother-in-law-to-be stepped in and made all the arrangements, seeing the minister, ordering flowers, getting an appointment with the

photographer, shopping for my suit and hat I was to wear, and had a reception for us at her house. It was all so nice of her, as my folks had answered the call of the Lord to their home beyond. (Mrs. L., Minnesota)

The war babies that arrive in such numbers while their fathers are in service often call mother-in-law into time-honored service. The long months of waiting, the delivery and lying-in, and then the nurturing of the young mother and child until husband-father-protector returns from service are war-born crisis periods for which many a mother-in-law enlists. Two brief excerpts from hundreds of such cases show mother-in-law in her true colors:

When my husband was called to the Army it left me feeling very lonely and depressed. Shortly after he was sent to Korea, we were blessed with a tiny son. My wonderful mother-in-law was with me every day I was in the hospital, and even paid my hospital bill! She asked me to come and live with her until I could get on my feet and find a suitable apartment. In fact, she wanted me to remain with her until my husband returns, but I feel she is so busy taking care of everyone, that I didn't want to add to her busy days.

However, her help to me has not ended there—she is still helping me now that I have an apartment, by supplying me with groceries, and other household necessities when she can. (Mrs. T., Wisconsin)

A year after our marriage Mother Nature required me to resign from my job. I couldn't be with my husband as long as his ship was out to sea. It was my loving mother-in-law that asked me to make my home with her. After watching over me like a guardian angel for the next four months, the day of the arrival finally came. She drove me eighteen miles to the nearest hospital and stayed at my bedside from eight that morning until eleven that night when all was over, holding my hand and giving me courage through those long agonizing hours, taking the place of my absent husband. She telegraphed her son that he was the father of a nice baby girl. Every day my mother-in-law drove those eighteen miles to visit us during our confinement.

Now the baby and I are still at home with mother-in-law. She is a great help in caring for the new infant as well as a great morale builder these long lonely months that we are waiting for Daddy to finish his hitch in the Navy. When we came home from the hospital she gave us her bedroom on the ground floor so we wouldn't have to run the stairs. She is asking for no compensation for her time,



work, and effort. She couldn't be any nicer if I were her own daughter, in place of the stranger her son married. (Mrs. L., Minnesota)

When casualties are reported, or men listed as missing in action, or a troop ship is torpedoed, panic may strike the serviceman's family unless some stabilizing force is at hand. This role, too, falls to mother-in-law in many a family, as the young wife below reports:

While my husband was over in Korea, she kept my faith in the future. When his ship was reported hit I was beside myself. Mother N., gifted with a greater wisdom than she knows, gave me courage to hope and pray that God would bring all safe home. She had greater wishes for my well-being than hers, although her sorrow was as great as mine. All of this comfort was put into loving and hopeful letters. Letters are hard to put a meaning in, but she managed to give me the faith I needed.

Eventually the man returns from his stint in the service. But even then the mother-in-law's job is not always done. Many a veteran, many a veteran's family, goes through a period of readjustment when a wise, loving mother-in-law can spell the difference between disruption and carrying-on. Both men and women acknowledge her help in the post-service period as we see below:

My husband came home, almost a year ago, safe and sound. We went to Mother N.'s on a vacation and are still here. She is not in the best of health and we wanted to be here.

It was a hard job for Ken and I to get in marriage harmony again. Therefore it resulted in many arguments. With her help, understanding, and truly loving of us, I believe we have overcome some of the hazards. It seems as if her grief in life has given her greater wisdom to try and help us in our problems. (Mrs. N., Montana)

Some months later—I returned to the states and my wife and I stayed with her mother and for practically nothing, too. She understood the position we were in. Now we have just gone to house-keeping for ourselves, and Mother has provided us with so many household articles we needed and couldn't afford to buy—things she don't even have herself.

The nice thing about it is that she treats me so much like her own son. (Mr. N., Ohio)



An occasional case reads almost like a catalogue of war-born needs for a mother-in-law's continued mothering. Portions of one such case indicate her role in the war wedding and honeymoon, the birth of the first child, the post-service adjustments, hospitalization, prolonged illness, and their attendant crises in the lives of the little family:

My story begins back in 1941 when I married my husband. My mother-in-law offered the use of her own new car so we might have a better honeymoon. We only had a few days, as my husband was serving as a soldier in the U.S. Army.

My husband was overseas in '42 when our tiny premature daughter arrived. My kind mother-in-law offered us a home with her, as we could find no place of our own. She refused to take any board and was always searching to do some kind favors to make life brighter while he was away.

When my hubby returned from overseas, she gave up her own bedroom that we might have a comfortable place together. Even then she forfeited her own pleasures in allowing us the use of her car so we could visit friends, etc.

Our son was born in the early summer of 1945. She had planned to keep our daughter till I was strong enough to resume my household tasks. However, it turned out that she kept her the entire summer. No one will realize what a help this was as it turned out to be a terrible hot summer to be living in a third floor attic apartment.

When our little girl needed hospitalization to correct a birth injury, she always cared for our son so we could visit her at the hospital.

In the fall of '49 I contracted polio and lost a 7-month premature baby. Again mother rushed to our aid and kept house so my husband could keep working. She did not live near us so this meant a lot of planning and sacrifice on her part to be here. All during my long hospitalization and convalescence, she cared for my son. The cheery letters and words of encouragement gave me courage to walk again. I could go on and on relating incidents of why she is the best mother-in-law a girl ever had. However, these are the highlights and I trust you'll agree she was more than a real mother to me. (Mrs. S., Rhode Island)

A grateful daughter-in-law in the East sums up mother-in-law's contribution to the wartime family simply:

Mothers-in-law are peacemakers, not troublemakers. She plays a very important role in keeping homes together while husbands are away fighting for world peace. (Mrs. K., New York)

### **She Made a Home for Us with Her, and We Love It**

It isn't always convenient for parents or parents-in-law to move over and make room for the young people when they move in, but many of them do it, and gladly according to the situation summarized here:

Not only did my mother-in-law invite me to come live with her, but she and Dad even gave up their bed and spent a year sleeping on the living room couch until we could afford and found our own little apartment. (Mrs. E., New Jersey)

During World War II, a young officer stationed in Florida unexpectedly received a medical discharge for some slight ailment. Whereupon he packed up his little family—his wife and three small children—and traveling night and day drove without a stop to his mother's home nearly a thousand miles away. When the tired little family disgorged itself at her door, hungry, sleepy, travel-weary, and homeless, she welcomed them as only a mother can. While they were eating the snack she prepared for them in the kitchen, she quietly stripped her room of all her clothes and effects, by the simple procedure of dumping the bureau drawers onto the sheet on her bed and tying the whole into a bundle. In less time than it takes to tell it, the room was ready for her son and his wife. Baths were drawn and the children bathed and in their beds by the time their parents had finished the last crumb of cake and were ready for bed themselves. For seven months the little family occupied the master suite, while the young mother's mother-in-law slept on the porch, with the bundle of her personal effects tucked under her cot.

The way in which a mother-in-law helped a young man make a smooth transition from bachelorhood to married living is detailed by an appreciative son-in-law who says:

I think I have the finest mother-in-law a young man can have. She has made my marriage of less than a year a bigger success than it would have been otherwise. From the outset my wife, Joan, and I have lived with her in comfortable surroundings, and this Spring she is converting her home to a two-family house so Joan and I can have a place of our own. Her understanding ways, helpful suggestions, and attitude of "all our help for the young married couple" has made the transition period from singleness to married life a smooth operation. Also, it has meant a considerable financial saving to me and my meager resources. (Mr. T., New York)

And so the cases go, one after another of them indicating that even the ultimate of the avoidance stereotype—that no one can live with his mother-in-law—is repudiated by experience in some families. The simple facts are that men and women *do* live with their mothers-in-law, some of them for many years, some because they prefer it; and many of them because they find that life with mother-in-law is very good.

We do not anticipate any great mass movement of young families back to their parents' homes. But we must recognize that for many millions, doubling up at least for a while may be a necessity; and that it need not be a disaster as the stereotypes of our culture suggest.

### **Who Appreciates Mother-in-Law's Gifts and Services? (Statistical Summary)**

Many persons appreciate the services and gifts mother-in-law bestows upon them. Some 830 men and women out of the total 3,683 persons (22.5%) in the mother-in-law contest submitted an entry in which the predominant sentiment was, "I appreciate all she does for us."

The distribution of this response among the four major regions of the United States is remarkably even, ranging from 21.6% in the West to 23.4% of all replies from the North Central.

Men quite as often as women express themselves as appreciating what their mothers-in-law do for them (22.6% of the men and 22.4% of the women in the sample).

Rural parts of the population respond with this sentiment

somewhat more often than do persons living in communities with more than 2,500 population. Of those living in rural sections, 24.4% note especially the many gifts and services their mothers-in-law give them. Of the people in urban areas, 21.4% respond in this way. The difference of 3.0% in such a large population (3,683) is marginally significant and may represent differences that do not occur by chance.

**TABLE 4**

**MOTHER-IN-LAW IS APPRECIATED FOR SERVICES AND GIFTS:  
PREDOMINANT SENTIMENT**

<i>Region</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Urban</i>	<i>Rural</i>	<i>Total</i>	
					<i>Num- ber</i>	<i>Per Cent</i>
North Central	58	195	157	96	253	23.4
North East	67	120	132	55	187	22.6
South	53	183	104	132	236	22.9
West	35	117	97	55	152	21.6
Total	213	615	490	338	828	22.5
Number	940	2,743	2,299	1,384		
Per Cent	22.6	22.4	21.4	24.4		

Mothers-in-law in rural areas often have more opportunities to help out their married children than do those who live in cities. It is easier for the country mother-in-law to give of an abundance of foodstuffs in her larder than it is for her city counterpart to share goods that are bought in the common market. Also, attitudes of family assistance are more deeply entrenched among farm families than in the cities where independent individualism is encouraged. So it may well be that there is a reliable difference in this sentiment by place of residence. Further study of the question will be of interest.

### **Women Love Their Mothers-in-Law as Mothers More Than Do Men (Statistical Summary)**

When they get a chance to be counted, many men and even more women rise up to say that they love their mothers-in-



law. "I like her, I love her, she is like a mother to me," is the predominant sentiment of 540 (15%) of the 3,683 replies in the CBS mother-in-law contest.

These persons are articulate about the place that mothers-in-law fill as "second mothers." They recount in moving detail the way mothers-in-law come to the rescue when the young couple most need a mother. They give the positive side of the mother-in-law story.

Women more often than men express warm, positive feelings about their mothers-in-law. While only 10.9% of the men report that they love their mothers-in-law because "she is like a mother to me," 15.9% of the women express themselves in this way. This difference between the sexes is significant at the one per cent level. It can be interpreted by remembering that women more than men are concerned about their relationships with their in-laws, and therefore might be expected to be more appreciative and loving toward their mothers-in-law when the relationship is a mutually pleasant one.

It may be too that women are more free to express affection toward their mothers-in-law than are men in our culture. Because the cultural stereotype operates so generally, many men feel that they are expected to react negatively toward their mothers-in-law, and at best only tolerate her as a necessary evil. When she is a person who is genuinely lovable and comes to stand in the place of the mother to a man, he, being a man in our culture, may be more reluctant to admit his affection for her than a woman would be.

The fact that more women than men also feel free to criticize their mothers-in-law when their relationships are not satisfactory would suggest that women are more accustomed to admitting their feelings about their relatives than are men. We have already seen that men more than women are reluctant to discuss their intrafamily relationships. We now have some indication that men more than women find it difficult to share their real feelings, positive or negative, toward their relatives.



**TABLE 5**  
**MOTHER-IN-LAW IS LIKE A MOTHER TO ME:**  
**PREDOMINANT SENTIMENT**

<i>Region</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Urban</i>	<i>Rural</i>	<i>Total</i>	
					<i>Num- ber</i>	<i>Per Cent</i>
North Central	24	129	95	58	153	14.0
North East	28	85	85	28	113	13.7
South	30	145	79	96	175	16.8
West	20	79	66	33	99	13.6
Total	102	438	325	215	540	14.7
Number	940	2,743	2,299	1,384		
Per Cent	10.9	15.9	14.2	15.5		

There are no significant differences between the urban (14.2%) and rural (15.5%) parts of the population in this factor. Nor are there significant differences between the percentages of the various regions in the expression of this sentiment. The South has a larger percentage of mentions of "I love her like a mother" sentiment than the other regions, but the difference is marginal in its significance and may be due to chance.

In ways that sheer numbers cannot show, a review of 540 cases reveals some of the dynamics of the mother-in-law's acceptance as a beloved mother, as seen in the following sections.

### **She Was the Mother I Never Had**

The loss of one's own mother seems to make mother-in-law especially beloved. A large number of both men and women who say that they love their mothers-in-law because "she is like a mother to me," are themselves orphans who have felt the need of a mother's love. Here are some typical examples, from women:

My mother died when I was four years old and I was moved from one place to another to live. I felt that I was unwanted by anyone. When I got married my mother-in-law accepted me as her daughter.

ter. She hasn't money to spend on me like some but she has given me something more than money can buy and wanted by everyone, Love. A feeling that you are wanted with sincerity and tenderness. (Mrs. J., Montana)

She has taken the place of mother to me; my father died when I was five years old and there were seven of us children; my mother was forced to give us to an orphanage to be adopted; I had a very lonely life with no mother; then when I married my mother-in-law came and she loved me as if I were her own, she stuck by in everything; when my husband was taken to some far place in the army she had me and my three children always. . . . (Mrs. A., Pennsylvania)

When I got married I not only got a husband, but also a second mother, my own having passed away when I was growing up. She has proved herself to be not only Don's mother, but also as close to me as my own mother would have been.

My husband is in the service and away much of the time, but when I need someone to talk to, Mom is always there. (Mrs. R., New York)

In 1936, my mother at 26 years of age died of pneumonia. Being an only child at the tender age of 5 my father returned to his home and my grandmother reared me until I was 18 years of age. On February 18, 1950, I was married and this was the beginning of a new life and new love for me, concerning husband and mother-in-law. I have never known such companionship and deep-rooted love could exist between a mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. She has outstretched her arms and opened her heart to such lengths as I shall never be able to return. (Mrs. R., Pennsylvania)

Men who have been orphaned before they marry are quite as articulate as are women in expressing their love for their mothers-in-law as the mothers they never had. A serviceman, a business man, and a college student speak for many men who have found much-needed mothering in their wives' mothers:

I like my mother-in-law because my mother died when I was a small boy and I was shifted from one aunt to another while my father worked, and these aunts didn't want to be bothered with me as they each had large families of their own. I had never known a mother's love and consideration; my mother-in-law had always wanted a son and she treats me as her own. She gives her life and love freely without asking anything in return. I was in the Navy

and I received a letter from my mother-in-law every week, and she did everything she could to keep up my wife's morale, which meant a lot to me. She's an all around good fella. (Mr. A., Missouri)

I lost my own mother when I was 13 and until I met and married my wife, never had a home.

I traveled with my dad and stayed in hotels, which are anything but homelike.

I have always had a yearning for a business of my own, which would have been an impossible dream come true if it hadn't been for my mother-in-law. She gave us part of her life savings to help open us a small grocery store.

My mother-in-law, incidentally, is a widow, which makes her sacrifice even more admirable. (Mr. W., Idaho)

A married student confesses that having lost his own mother when he was small, he had only the fear born of the mother-in-law myth to guide him until his wife's mother accepted him into the family and brought happiness to his marriage:

I married her daughter a year and a half ago, before I had graduated from college. Because I was not exactly in a position to support my prospective wife in the "manner to which she was accustomed," I feared strong disapproval of our marriage. In view of the fact that my own mother had died when I was a small boy, I had no idea of how to approach such a situation. My fears were groundless, however, as the warmth and understanding with which our announcement was accepted by my mother-in-law gave us happiness beyond words. Since our marriage I have belonged to two families and, yet, have had none of the distrustful domination that is so characteristic of the fictitious mother-in-law. It is impossible for me to over-praise how much my mother-in-law has enriched and helped my marriage. (Mr. D., West Virginia)

Reviewing these many tributes to mother-in-law that come from orphaned brides and grooms makes one wonder if those persons who have lost their own mothers make better adjustments with their mothers-in-law than do those who still have a mother of their own. One family relations authority has gone on record as saying that the only couples who have no trouble with their in-laws are orphans. This is usually interpreted facetiously. But it may well be that orphans are actually more inclined to appreciate their mothers-in-law, and so have less

difficulty with them than do individuals with the normal complement of parents. This would be an interesting hypothesis to pursue in further research on the subject.

### **She Loved Me: Child of a Broken Home**

A recent study <sup>2</sup> of adjustment problems of young people from normal and from broken homes indicates that children of broken homes are more than usually concerned about learning what it takes to make a good marriage and family life. Studying the 4,400 graduating seniors from high schools in the State of Washington in 1947, Dr. Landis reports:

The question "what makes for a good marriage" is one about which the girls were most seriously concerned. Even in complete families, almost a third were concerned about this question; but in families that had been broken by death or separation the proportion runs much higher. A higher proportion of boys in divorced than in complete families was concerned about this also. (p. 11)

Cases in our files illustrate this exaggerated concern for marital success on the part of those whose parents' home had failed. In one instance, the bride expresses warm appreciation for her mother-in-law whom she feels taught her what she needed to know to make a happy home:

I owe most of my married happiness to her. Her son and I ran away and were married on my eighteenth birthday. I was a child from a broken home, and had been pushed around a lot. No one had ever really had a real interest in me. And, I had never had a home in the true sense of the word. When I first saw my husband's home, so shining clean, so well kept, so secure, I knew that was the kind of a home I wanted for my future children.

She really took us to task for running away to be married. Then settled back and accepted the fact. In my stumbling young way I told her what her home meant to me and asked her to help me make one for my family. That pleased her, I think, and eased the situation.

Then she said to me, "Elizabeth, a home such as this must grow. And, it isn't easy. I have sacrificed much to make a home my sons would love. It is built with love, devotion, and very hard work. You must take the bare house and make a home grow the way you



want it to. It is like planting a garden, and must be tended just as much. But, if you are willing I will help you." And, so she did. So very much.

Again she would say "Yes, I know three good meals a day can be very boring, but they are also very necessary to the good health of your family. You keep your husband well fed and he will take good care of you."

And so she carried on my education for a good marriage. She was the mother I had never had. (Mrs. E., Missouri)

### **She Accepted Me Even After My Own Marriage Was Broken**

The cases that challenge the mother-in-law stereotype most strikingly are those in which the mother-in-law continues to accept her daughter-in-law even after the marriage contracted by her son is broken. In some cases the daughter-in-law divorced the son, yet continued to enjoy the support of her mother-in-law:

My mother-in-law is certainly worth writing about. After living with her son for 16 years I have divorced him, and today after 15 years living apart from him she still keeps me and my two children in the family circle. My daughter is a mother of two children and my son is still living at home with me. And my mother-in-law, well if I had a mother I don't think she could be to me any better; when I come to see her I have to sit next to her, she takes my hand and makes me very happy. (Mrs. B., Massachusetts)

When my first husband and I were married, we simply weren't getting along. Due to financial difficulties we were forced to move in with his parents. Then he started to go out with other women. His mother would not stand for this and forced him to leave home. I remained with my baby. I started divorce proceedings with both of his parents' consent. After finishing some schooling I went to work and his mother looked after my baby. She encouraged me to date other men. Then I met R., my present husband. He proposed to me and my mother-in-law was very happy and arranged for the wedding reception in her home.

What a situation! There was all my first husband's relatives which were many, a few of R.'s, and my few relatives. It really was lovely and everyone was so happy for me. Throughout the 16 years I've known my mother-in-law there has never been a quarrel or mis-



understanding between us. We are very close to this day. Everyone that knows her loves her, and I love her very much. (Mrs. R., Colorado)

Some women whose marriages have been broken by death find that their mothers-in-law continue to make them feel a part of the family. One woman in central Illinois tells of nursing her husband through many years of sleeping sickness. She did it by moving in with her mother-in-law, who fed, clothed, and housed them both through the years, paying the wife ten dollars a week to keep the house. After the husband's death, the widow stayed on in her mother-in-law's home as one of the family. Then, when her mother-in-law died, she inherited all of her real estate because as she sees it, "She really loved her son and *me*."

A war-widow expresses her appreciation for her two mothers-in-law whom she gets along with quite as well as she does with her own mother:

I not only have one mother-in-law. I have two! You see my first husband was killed overseas. I have a little girl (8½) that was born one month after her daddy was killed. Then I remarried again when she was 2½. By that marriage I have a little boy 5 and a little girl 2½.

All my children have three sets of grandparents. My folks and my two in-laws.

Some girls can't even get along with one mother-in-law. But I really and truly love both of mine.

My first in-laws are wonderful. . . . I'm their "daughter" and my husband is their "son-in-law." Could you ask for a better ending to such a tragic beginning? (Mrs. J., Colorado)

### **She Is More Than a Mother to Me for My Own Mother Failed Me**

Reading like variations on the Ugly Duckling theme are the documents of girls whose own mothers have rejected them and who have found a mother's love in their mothers-in-law:

I was a girl-bride of eighteen. My mother-in-law was my pillar and foundation because my own mother did not approve of my marriage and I was put out before my wedding.

My mother-in-law bought my wedding dress and gave us a wonderful reception and shower. She gave us a home for six months and when we found a three-room house it was my mother-in-law who did most of the preparations for moving. A year later a baby was born crippled—spinal bifida—at five weeks she was dying. Mother-in-law again was our staunch support. She stayed with the baby and me constantly until she died. (Mrs. R., Pennsylvania)

. . . I feel like she [mother-in-law] is more like my real mother in that I can always tell her my troubles where I couldn't ever talk to my own mother. . . .

There is one reason why I can never stop loving her and that is because she came all the way to Milwaukee to take care of me and the baby while my own mother who lived right in the same city wouldn't even come over to see me, and when the baby nearly died from a bowel infection because he was born too early my mother-in-law helped me through it while my own mother wouldn't believe the baby was sick enough to be put back in the hospital.

She [mother-in-law] has always stuck up for me when my mother never came to see me in three years. She has let me cry it out and then after I got over it would tell me I should go see my folks who I had to beg to come see me. Maybe this sounds like a sob story but to me she is my real mother. (Mrs. D., Nevada)

### **Mother-in-Law Sides with Me**

An interesting revelation that comes from many families is the mother-in-law siding with her son- or daughter-in-law instead of her own married child, when differences arise. This appears to be a mutually acceptable procedure that often works for harmony all around. The own-child is pleased that his or her mother appreciates the mate, and is not threatened because the mother's love of her own is assured. The mother-in-law feels closer to both for having taken the part of the outsider; while the young child-in-law is warmly touched by the mother-in-law's acceptance as interpreted by her partiality. This is an intriguing phenomenon as seen clearly in the way actual persons describe the practice and its effect.

A Massachusetts lawyer feels that his family is unusual because both mothers-in-law are partial to their in-law children,

and that the mutual ego-building is wonderful for the morale of the marriage:

Maybe our situation is different than that of other people but we really have an unusual set-up. The joker in our family life is that both mothers side in with the in-laws whenever there is an argument. It is almost an unholy alliance the way my mother and wife work together to keep me in line. As far as my mother is concerned, my wife can do no wrong. I've never been able to win an argument with my wife when my mother has been around. Boy, are they thick as thieves.

But in case you think I live a miserable, woman-dominated life; I don't. Everytime the going gets rough I take my wife over to visit her mother. From there on everything is swell. My mother-in-law, the darling, swears I can do no wrong. She's so nice and sticks up for me so much that my wife swears she has a crush on me. A couple of hours at her house does wonders for my ego and everything is rosy again. (Mr. J., Massachusetts)

A case is reported in which the young wife was quite immature and found it difficult to get along with her husband and make the adjustments of early married living. The husband frequently consulted his mother-in-law and after talking the situation over with her, tried to follow the guidance she gave him. The man and his mother-in-law understood each other so well that the young wife once burst forth in jealousy, "Well, if you think so much of Mom, why didn't you marry her instead of me?" That outburst was taken casually as a symptom of her insecurity and immaturity which could be expected to wane as her self-confidence increased. Sure enough, under the tutelage of his mother-in-law the young man encouraged the blooming of the girl into full womanhood, to the place where both the couple bless her as the one who safeguarded the happiness that is theirs today.

The mutual affection between a woman's husband and her mother (his mother-in-law) makes this Oklahoma woman so happy that she volunteers this statement for our study:

You really should have had my mother and husband in your study. They are so devoted to each other. As a friend said to me the other day, "I think your family loves your husband more than they do you." Of course, this attitude keeps me very happy, and especially

so as Momma has made her home with us for the last three years.  
(Mrs. M., Oklahoma)

### **She Reared the One I Married (Statistical Summary)**

Many people are impressed by the fact that the person they married was reared by mother-in-law. Nearly five hundred (483; 13.2%) of the total 3,683 men and women entering the mother-in-law contest expressed this as their predominant sentiment.

The "Reared Spouse" sentiment is evenly distributed. Men (13.8%) as well as women (12.9%) express this as their predominant sentiment. The rural (13.8%) and urban (13.6%) parts of the population have nearly identical percentages. Persons in the South mention this factor less frequently than do those from other regions, as is seen in the accompanying table (Table 6). The difference is barely significant (C.R. 2.3).

**TABLE 6**

**SHE REARED MY SPOUSE: PREDOMINANT SENTIMENT**

<i>Region</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Urban</i>	<i>Rural</i>	<i>Total Num- ber</i>	<i>Per Cent</i>
North Central	26	109	71	64	135	13.4
North East	43	81	95	29	124	15.0
South	29	93	64	58	122	11.7
West	31	73	75	29	104	14.3
Total	129	356	305	180	485	13.2
Number	940	2,743	2,299	1,384		
Per Cent	13.4	12.9	13.6	13.8		

There are interesting variations on the theme, "My mother-in-law reared the one I married." Men and women express this sentiment in varying degrees of personal reference, all the way from the general observation that were there no mothers-in-law, there would be no marriages, no brides, no grooms, no mate to marry, to warm expressions of appreciation of the role of the other's mother in developing the kind of person the mate



has become. Case analyses point up some of these individual variations, in the sections that follow.

### **Mother-in-Law Was First a Mother**

Speaking at large of mothers-in-law,  
Give credit where credit is due:  
Unless years ago, they had pushed a carriage,  
I couldn't enjoy the blessings of marriage,  
And neither—my friend—could you.  
(Mrs. E., Arizona)

There is some recognition of the fact that a mother-in-law is a mother whose sons and daughters have married. Several men and women comment on the peculiar tendency among Americans to revere their mothers, at the same time that they attack their mothers-in-law with hostile humor. They point out that in so doing we are attacking mothers on the other side of the family.

One young man, married only a short while, observes that this reminds him of the "good fairy—bad fairy" stories, in which the own-mother is always the Good Fairy who does only good deeds, while the mother-in-law is the Bad Fairy who is responsible for all the evil influence in the marriage.

Psychiatric insight suggests that we may use our mothers-in-law as scapegoats upon whom we can pile all the hostilities that had accumulated against our own mothers through the years. In a culture like ours that sentimentalizes about mothers, these aggressions cannot easily be expressed directly against one's own mother. Mother-in-law, then, serves as the Bad Mother who can be safely attacked without censure, and upon whom negative feelings toward Mother are released.

As we saw in Chapter 3, many people are repudiating the mother-in-law stereotype as unfair and untrue. One married woman expresses the sentiments of many who recognize that a mother-in-law is simply a mother whose child has married:

How can any married person who truly loves his or her mother repeat one of those ugly jokes about mothers-in-law? Doesn't he



(or she) realize he not only maligns his beloved's mother, but the joke also includes his own mother whom he wouldn't hurt for the world!

One day, some years ago, my mother went (as did yours) through the valley of the shadow of death—in order that I might know life. She spent many sleepless nights and tiring days nurturing me through the hungry helpless months of babyhood, the growing formative years of childhood, and the turbulent confusing years of alternating happiness and despair known only to the teen-ager. She gave self-sacrificing care, yet managed not to smother me with her love. She did her best to teach me honesty, faith, love, and independence.

Then one day, I walked down an aisle to become the bride of the man I love. That marriage ceremony made my mother a MOTHER-IN-LAW, yet it didn't change one iota the character of the woman she was and always shall be!

The fact that a woman's children marry, makes her no better nor worse a person than she already is!!! (Mrs. D., Indianapolis, Ind.)

### **Mother-in-Law Still Functions as a Mother**

Several men and women suggest that one use for mothers-in-law is to complete the rearing of their offspring who from time to time still need a mother's firm hand. Illustrative cases have been reported by men and women in about equal numbers. They sound something like this:

Whenever my husband gambled or imbibed too freely, I threatened to call his mother . . . the only person he feared. That did the trick. (Mrs. G., West Virginia)

A very good use for mothers-in-law is that you always have a place to send your wife when she gets out of hand. (Mr. J., Ohio)

She has a place where I can return my wife to. (Mr. P., Illinois)

Probably some of these statements are made tongue in cheek. We know, however, of one man who claims that when his wife acts immature and troubles him with her childishness, he considers it the responsibility of her mother, who did not complete the job of socializing her daughter. So he packs off the immature female to her mother and tells her to return when she is grown up enough to act like a married woman.

The indications are that although some men and women may

not have been reared well, many others do their mothers proud. The largest group of those who mention the mother-in-law's role in rearing their spouse speak with warm appreciation of the fine job she did in raising a splendid person.

It is possible that there is a correlation between satisfaction with one's spouse and adjustment to one's mother-in-law—a promising area for further research that is beyond the scope of our investigation except in the numerous implications that point in this direction.

### **Mother-in-Law Reared the Fine Person I Married**

Rearing a man or woman mature enough to assume the responsibilities of marriage is the supreme test of parenthood. One of the most frequent criticisms by married persons is the immaturity of their mates. When a person's inadequacies are apparent, his parents are blamed. Conversely, parents often are credited by their sons- and daughters-in-law for rearing fine responsible mates.

This exploratory study turns up some quite articulate examples of credit being given the mother-in-law for the fine job she did in rearing a spouse who stands up well in the tests of marriage. Here is one:

One day before we were married my future mother and I were doing dishes after a meal at her home. As I found myself, by pure coercion, wielding a dish towel we had an opportunity to talk about the approaching marriage and our new relationship.

Partly in jest, I said, "When Dorothy (my wife) gets angry with me and runs home to mother how do you want her sent, prepaid, or F.O.B.?"

"If she ever pulls a stunt like that, she is not going to set foot in this house before she goes back to you," she said. And she was serious. Furthermore Dorothy knew she felt that way because her mother had trained her to stand upon her own choices, and I'm happy to say there haven't been many times when she has had to stand on me, yet.

I can speak only from my own experience when I admit that mothers-in-law are wonderful people and I am sincerely grateful to her for helping to make my wife the wonderful person she is. (Mr. R., Illinois)

Several persons comment appreciatively upon their mates' reflecting the fine qualities of the mothers who reared them. One man speaks of the "perversity of the genes" in observing that children seem to inherit only the unfortunate qualities of their parents. But, by and large, there is a considerable body of appreciation for the extent to which the one married resembles his or her mother. Two brief illustrations:

I like my mother-in-law for giving me my husband but I love and honor her for making him the fine man he is; for he is but a mirror of her great life. (Mrs. J., Denver, Colo.)

She is kind, generous, and loving. These same rich qualities she has bestowed upon her son, who is my husband; and through him has made my married life one that is full of love, health, and happiness. (Mrs. D., Yuma, Ariz.)

Many others credit their mothers-in-law with guiding the personality development of their children to the place where a fine adult eventually emerged. These persons see the spouse not so much as mirroring his or her mother, as having become what he is as the result of her active application of the best she knew in human development. These men and women appear to recognize the complexity of the process of socialization and to appreciate the skilled functioning it takes to produce a mature well-adjusted man or woman. They show, too, a sensitivity for teasing out of the personalities of the ones they married those particular qualities that are the direct result of the mother's teaching. An example illustrates the point:

Only a swell person could have reared the man I married. He is thoughtful, considerate, and still very much the gentleman, with or without company. From his mother he got the idea that women are people too, that their work is necessary to the happiness and well-being of a family; and that there are times when the stress of the job makes perfect stinkers of them. He learned to pitch in and help this situation, not with condescension like a mighty lord rendering aid to a slave, but as a partner in a worthy enterprise.

Having spent some time with my mother-in-law, I have had an opportunity to see how she went about rearing her son, and to pick up a few pointers for my own relationship with him. (Mrs. I., North Carolina)

### **Mother-in-Law and I Both Love the Same Man**

Women express themselves as appreciating their mothers-in-law especially because they both (as mother and as wife) love the same man. This has all the marks of a mature kind of affection that is not threatened by another's love. We could hypothesize that the wives who express this sentiment are, on the whole, mature, secure women who can share their husband's love with his family, and especially are not jealous of his mother. A parallel hypothesis is that mothers-in-law who are not made anxious by the knowledge of their son's love for his wife are, generally speaking, mature women who are able to let their son go, and who actively promote his mature roles. These are hypotheses that should not be too difficult to explore, but are outside the scope of the current study.

A woman from rural Tennessee expresses this sentiment by saying that the greatest tie of all is the love of the same man by two women in the family who make a happy triangle into a family circle:

I love my mother-in-law because we share the love of her son—my husband. She makes me feel as welcome as her own daughters. She doesn't play any favorites and all of her daughters and sons-in-law love her. There's no little jealousies for true love knows no jealousy. I really am lucky I have two mothers, for to love a husband dearly a wife loves and respects his mother.

We're just plain folks joined by the greatest tie of all—love of the same man that makes a happy triangle into a family circle. (Mrs. E., Tennessee)

On quite a realistic note, a married woman in New England tells of how she and her mother-in-law see eye to eye about the faults of their beloved husband and son. Talking through the recurrent irritations together provides an effective safety valve for her marriage.

My mother-in-law is wonderful to me. When my husband does the stupid, assinine, annoying things that most husbands do, I go to her and tell her, at length, what a fool I married. She agrees with me and supplements my recital with anecdotes about the outrageous things he did before I married him. When my anger has talked itself



out, we both agree that with all his faults, he's a sweet, lovable man and an excellent husband for me.

I come home and cook him a good supper and he praises me for my understanding. As my safety valve, she deserves much credit for the success of my marriage. (Mrs. J., Rhode Island)

### **Mother-in-Law Is Like a Mother to Me (Summary)**

Review of the 1,853 human documents volunteered in this section of the study is challenging to the bad-mother-in-law stereotype.

One out of every four men and women appreciate mother-in-law's gifts and services in the form of help in establishing their homes, seeing them through the birth of their children, illness, family crises, military service, and even providing a home for them with her (a fate more tolerable than popular folklore would have us believe).

More women than men say they love their mothers-in-law like mothers. Men and women orphaned in childhood are especially devoted to their mothers-in-law, as the mothers they never had. Children of broken homes are usually concerned about building a good marriage and in many cases acknowledge mother-in-law's help in doing so. Some mothers-in-law remain loyal to their daughters-in-law even after their sons have died or divorced. Continuing acceptance after the marriage is broken means much to the widows who love their mothers-in-law for keeping them within the family circle. Having been rejected by one's own mother makes acceptance by one's mother-in-law especially meaningful. Partiality shown children-in-law in some cases makes for harmony between the generations.

There is general recognition of the role mothers-in-law play in rearing the person one marries. Mother-in-law is seen as having been first a mother, as continuing some mother-functions, as entitled to credit for raising a fine person, and as loving the same man as does the wife.

In general, one of every two men and women say they love mother-in-law as a mother, or as "the best friend I ever had."



Questions for further research arising from this section of the study are:

1. What characteristics are associated with the ability to accept help from parental families, and which with tendencies to insist upon complete independence as young married couples? Is it the younger, more traditionally oriented bride and groom who more comfortably appreciate mother-in-law's gifts and services? Or?
2. Is the hypothesis, arising out of our cases, that mother-in-law is more acceptable as guide and teacher of the new bride than is her own mother, generally applicable?
3. Is jesting in connection with appreciation of parental help usually an indication of embarrassment in running counter to cultural expectations?
4. Who finds living with mother-in-law as difficult as popular opinion suggests? What lies back of the stereotype that no one can live with his mother-in-law and like it?
5. Are the hypotheses, raised as interpretations of our findings, that more women than men love their mothers-in-law as mothers, valid?
6. Is it generally true that orphans respond especially warmly to their mother-in-law's mothering?
7. Are a mother-in-law's acceptance and assistance particularly important to the child from a broken home?
8. We find cases of girls whose own mothers have rejected them especially grateful for acceptance by their mothers-in-law. Is this generally true? Or, does negative experience with one's own parents more often predispose one to difficulty with in-laws?
9. Does mother-in-law's partiality for her children-in-law rather than for her own children make for family harmony generally?
10. Is satisfaction with one's mate related to good mother-in-law adjustment, as our data suggest?
11. Are wives who appreciate their mothers-in-law's love

for their married sons, mature, secure women, as we hypothesize?

12. Is the hypothesis sound that it is the mature mother who can actively accept her son's love for his wife?

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## Mother-in-Law as a Person

ONE OUT OF EVERY FOUR men and women who have anything to say about their mothers-in-law report that they like her as a person. Scores of complimentary adjectives are applied to their mothers-in-law by 913 persons, 25% of the total 3,683 who participated in the mother-in-law contest.

These tributes point especially to the kind of person the mother-in-law is. The predominant sentiment is neither on the mutual love nor the help she gives, although both of these are often mentioned. The emphasis made by the persons in this category is on the personality of the mother-in-law.

This sentiment is the one expressed most often. A higher percentage of the total is found here than in any of the original categories (Table 3). Just a few more men than women are found in this grouping, with 25.6% of the men and 24.5% of the women responding that they appreciate their mothers-in-law as persons. The differences between the sexes is not significant, nor between the urban-rural residence of the respondents, which are practically identical with 25.0% and 24.4% respectively (Table 7).

For some reason yet to be explained, persons from the North Central region of the country respond with this sentiment in significantly larger numbers than do men and women from any other region. At the same time a significantly smaller percentage of the sentiment is predominant in the responses from the

North East. These regional differences would bear further investigation in some future research.

Analysis of the nearly one thousand (913) documents in this category helps us see what it is that people say they feel when they repeat they like their mothers-in-law as persons.

**TABLE 7**  
**MOTHER-IN-LAW IS APPRECIATED AS A PERSON:**  
**PREDOMINANT SENTIMENT**

<i>Region</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Urban</i>	<i>Rural</i>	<i>Total</i>	
					<i>Num- ber</i>	<i>Per Cent</i>
North Central	82	234	196	120	316	29.0
North East	45	113	114	44	158	19.1
South	70	196	140	126	266	25.6
West	43	130	125	48	173	23.8
Total	240	673	575	338	913	24.8
Number	940	2,743	2,299	1,384		
Per Cent	25.6	24.5	25.0	24.4		

### **Mother-in-Law Is an All-Round Fine Person**

Many men and women go on record as feeling that their mothers-in-law are fine persons. They describe their own mothers-in-law as being sweet, kind and considerate, charming and gracious, good sports, as having a good sense of humor, as never complaining, as being vigorous and spry, and so on and on through the complimentary characteristics.

Rather than list all these terms of admiration, let us look at the constellations of characteristics that make mother-in-law admirable in the eyes of some sons- and daughters-in-law. The first is that mother-in-law is an all-round fine person:

Picture a pert, well-dressed, attractive, generous, loving, witty person. That's my momma-in-law. We affectionately call her "Spook" and most everyone in town says I married her son just to get her for a mother-in-law. Possible. Recently my husband left for overseas again, and any other daughter would have gone home to momma; I went to my momma-in-law's.



We have been stationed in many parts of the U.S.A., plus Japan, and at every opportunity we've had her join us. She's captivated the "higher brass," made the other wives adore her and with her Texas drawl held many an affair together that would have sagged in the middle. (Mrs. J., Texas)

In our family, there exists a great deal of love and harmony. A good bit of this happiness can be attributed to my mother-in-law. In my estimation, there is none as grand as she.

Since I have been married to her son, "Mom" has made me feel like her very own daughter. Having lost my own mother at the age of ten, Mom has taken away much of the emptiness I oftentimes felt through the past years.

Mom is a great confidante of mine and is just like one of the girls when it comes to being fun. What else can any girl ask for? Love, humor, confidence, wisdom—all these are part of my Mom.

She's our Queen and "Long may She Reign!" (Mrs. M., Pennsylvania)

As a person, she is charming, gracious and pleasant to have around. She's just *good* company! In her presence there is never a dull moment.

### Mother-in-Law Is Good to Live With

When so many men and women find that their mothers-in-law are all-round fine persons, it is not surprising to find many others expressing as their predominant sentiment that they live with their mothers-in-law and like it. (See also Chapters 3 and 6.) These accounts vary widely. They all agree that she is the kind of person who is good to live with. This is in contradistinction to those reported in Chapter 6 whose mothers-in-law made a home for them with her as one of her services to the young couple. An example follows:

My mother-in-law is one of the warmest and most sincere friends that I have.

We have been members of the same household for twenty-five years, so there is no doubt that we are thoroughly acquainted with each other's traits of character and idiosyncrasies.

Her constructive criticism is offered only when sought. I have grown to place high value on her impartial and unbiased opinions.

She is seventy-one years of age but has remained very young in

spirit. She is vitally interested in current affairs. Since we are of different political faiths, we have some very stimulating discussions.

She still hunts, fishes, and takes quite an extensive trip with us each summer.

She has a collection of quilts each of which has taken a first prize at the Ohio State Fair. . . .

I am truly proud of her and can truthfully say that my devotion to her is as great as was my love for my own mother. (Mr. F., Ohio)

### **Mother-in-Law Is Understanding**

Men seem to be especially appreciative of mothers-in-law who are understanding and sensitive of their feelings. They express in many ways their appreciation for her sensitivity and insight. A man's warm response to her insightful assistance may begin in his courtship of her daughter. (See also Chapter 4.) It is often heightened in periods of stress when she senses his need without his telling her. The cases quoted below illustrate these several forms of admiration of understanding mothers-in-law:

There's a lady—a queen. Who thinks with her heart, who understands with her soul, and who stands in the background giving me her best.

She is my friend—my mother-in-law. (Mr. A., North Dakota)

My mother-in-law is the best mother-in-law because everytime that I called on my wife she was there to greet me graciously and with a smile. She understood that I loved her daughter, and that her daughter loved me. She was the "go-between" who made our real love come true.

She realized and seemed to understand just what we both were going thru. She sensed our shyness and timidity as tho it reappeared in her own experience, trying hard to make sure that we would not suffer the handicaps that she went thru in her own courting days.

Indeed how well I remember her counselling when I waited for my sweetheart. How pleasantly, gracefully, with a continuous smile and the encouraging expression which lit up her whole face and countenance when she slowly guided me thru the affairs of a happy wedded bliss being diplomatic and pointing out the pitfalls and weaknesses of the good and the required courage ever encouraging me how to become a capable man, husband and father as well as son-in-law. (Mr. G., California)

My wife and I spent a weekend with her, shortly after my father died and I had settled his affairs. That was the first time I saw the cufflinks. She got them out of her safe deposit box to show them to me. They had been her father's, the ones he wore the day he was married, and possibly the most valuable things that he, as a very young man, had ever owned until that wedding day. They were solid gold, beautifully made by hand and beautifully engraved with an intricate, all-over design. They must have cost a great deal, even in those days. They had been given to her father by some wise relative who knew young Jimmy would be nervous and probably scared a little.

"There are times when even a man needs to be bucked up with a thing, like a woman when she needs a new hat," she commented. I could see the cufflinks meant a great deal to her. Then she offered them to me. I managed not to take them without offending her. Later that evening, the three of us went to dinner, "this time on me" she put in. This was Saturday night in the small town. The stores were open and she bought my wife—yes, a new hat. I think that in a way, she was a little relieved that I hadn't accepted the cufflinks.

That was over ten years ago. It had been a quiet incident, but the real beginning of our close relationship.

Throughout this past year, I've been greatly concerned about business, like many men. We've never mentioned any of this to Mother, even when matters reached a climax just a few weeks ago. But in the middle of one troubled afternoon, the phone rang. She was calling, long distance.

"I'm troubled about you two." And she called us "kids." We lied completely and assured her all was well, but she didn't believe us. In every letter, she kept inquiring, again and again.

Across three thousand miles, and in spite of the most carefully worded letters, she got the idea. But with characteristic good taste, she stopped asking.

By Christmas time, business concerns had mounted even more, and it was no consolation to know that little is usually accomplished until after the holidays. There would be no family reunion, for everyone was busy with too many responsibilities to allow travel. Packages had been sent off, and other packages received.

Christmas morning, we opened our gifts, trying to be as gay as we could, with the family divided by so many miles. Last of all, my wife handed me one very small package. I opened it. In a lovely little box, were the solid gold cufflinks, and a card. It read: "In spite of your denials, I think this may be a good time for the male equivalent of a new hat." And it was signed by a very wonderful mother-in-law. (Mr. V., California)

## She Is Kind and Helpful

Men and women alike admire mothers-in-law who are kind and helpful—and not just because she renders them assistance from time to time. Although they may appreciate that, as we saw in Chapter 6, the outstanding characteristic in the comments within this category is that she is the sort of person who is basically kind and thoughtful of others.

She was a good mother in every way, brought up her family alone, a widow gave them all a good education. But her love to poor people was *outstanding*. Every tramp or hobo that came to her little home, where she lived all alone, was asked into the home. She got their history, address, and got clothes that she could spare. She was not a wealthy person, but was always able in some way to give a helping hand to her children or others. These people were told to come any day they needed food or clothes to wear. One day to my surprise she was serving a chicken dinner to 9 of them. The table in all white linen and flowers. She at the head of the table happy, they were all her children. I'll never forget the type of people who sat there. I know many folks would lock their doors if they saw them coming. To top off, the day of the big dinner there were about 7 pairs of men's trousers and Oh, that underwear hanging on the clothes line. One old man, who had been thrown out of his house because his mind was not clear, had turned the washing machine, while she and a homeless woman made the dinner. Her request was that if she would die suddenly that they would be notified some way, and they were, those that could be found. She died at the age of 80 years. Her family was more surprised to see all these people sitting next to them at the funeral in church. I don't believe there have ever been more tears shed than at this funeral. (Mrs. R., Minnesota)

A newspaper editor hears about all kinds of people, but in this one's experience, his mother-in-law tops them all. He says in part:

When it comes to praiseworthy mothers-in-law, mine is a sweepstakes winner! Now a mellow 83, she retains her sweetness, her helpfulness, her mentality and her deep interest in others. She is always doing a good turn.

She cares for her large, seven-room home, her 85 year old husband and a luxuriant rose garden; she takes an active interest in clubs and



church and attends all regularly. She still effectively heads a county chapter of the Ohioanna Library Association, collecting historical data.

A stickler for propriety and fair play, she has a wide interest in people and government and a devotion to the underprivileged.

Perhaps the best way to express my appreciation for my mother-in-law is to say that acquiring such a one is a good reason for getting married—especially so since my wife is much like her mother. (Mr. M., Ohio)

### **She Is Courageous Through Hardship**

If medals were bestowed upon mothers-in-law for gallantry in action, many would be recommended for them by their appreciative sons- and daughters-in-law. Men and women from every section of the country extol their mothers-in-law for bravery under difficulties. The courage with which she has met life's crises is explicit in many case histories, from which these excerpts are taken:

Years ago, when she first became my mother-in-law, her doctor ordered her to a sanitarium for at least a year. Uncomplaining, she laid aside her dawn-to-after-dark work as a farmer's wife, and became a model patient, cooperating in every way to regain her health. She returned home much improved and has followed a routine of rest and healthful living ever since. Probably the most severe test her courage has ever had came two years ago when her youngest daughter, the mother of two babies, was severely stricken with polio. Separated from the beloved baby of her family by four hundred miles and her own poor health, she has kept an unending stream of cheerful, hopeful, loving letters going forth to her daughter. The first time she saw her after the polio attack, a less sturdy soul must have faltered to see the change the dread disease had wrought. But not Mother, she kept up her courage and good cheer and neither then nor since has she given in to tears of helplessness and despair. As though to justify her mother's devotion, and loyalty, and faith and courage, the stricken daughter continues to make a slow but steady progress. (Mrs. W., Idaho)

During the first two years of our marriage my own mother was a cancer patient. My mother-in-law visited us often, helping in the home and acting as a companion for my ill mother. Time and time again she aided us financially with the heavy medical expenses.



Not once during this trying period did she mention that her doctor had discovered a cataract on each eye and had advised surgery. After my mother's death she quietly consulted a specialist and made arrangements for eye surgery. The first operation was not successful and it was necessary for her to wait for more than a year before the doctors would consider another operation to try and restore her sight. She was forbidden to try to continue her letter writing, and at the age of 72 she learned the touch system on the typewriter and continued her correspondence with her relatives and friends.

This summer I had polio and although she was unable to travel from Akron, Ohio, to visit us, her typewritten letters came daily with reassuring messages of hope and courage.

Two weeks ago she had eye surgery again and we are awaiting the outcome which will not be known until January 13th. Whatever the outcome, she will not lose faith or relinquish her efforts to serve those she loves. In placing her in an exalted position, we ourselves feel endowed with the characteristics she possesses, which have made her life so full. (Mrs. S., South Carolina)

It may be "cheaper by the dozen" but it isn't easy to be left a widow with twelve children to raise. The courage that it took is noted by the daughter-in-law of a rural Wisconsin woman in this brief excerpt:

She and her husband had 12 wonderful children, 5 girls and 7 boys. But unfortunately her husband passed away when the youngest children were very young . . . she raised them the best she could. She had lots of courage and faith because sometimes the going was tough but she held her head high and saw the hard times thru. Today she is a wonderful mother and grandmother and is about to become a great grandmother. (Mrs. E., Wisconsin)

Even if a mother isn't widowed, there are plenty of difficulties to be overcome in raising twelve children to maturity, as this admiring daughter-in-law recognizes:

My mother-in-law had 12 children—6 boys and 6 girls. For those children she spent many years of hard work during the days and hours of sewing away into wee hours of morning so that her family be clothed and fed—many weeks of long illness never daunted her determination to keep doing for them. In spite of many heart breaking incidents in her life—she never dwelt on them—she always was ready to grasp at the few opportunities afforded her for happy times. (Mrs. H., Pennsylvania)

## **She Rises Above Trouble**

Both men and women comment appreciatively on the way in which their mothers-in-law rise above trouble. There is a quality here that goes a step beyond the sturdy courage of the pioneer woman, or the widow left with a brood of children to raise all alone. These are women with the ability to take life as it comes and surmount their problems in a way that brings a quiet peace to everyone around them. Two illustrations stand for scores:

This dear little old lady, 97 years old, brought up a family of ten children; lost her husband twenty-seven years ago, but continues to live in her quiet, modest little home on Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia. She is cared for tenderly by a bachelor son, assisted by one of his sisters, or sometimes a maid. Altho she is blind in one eye she sees more good in this world than most of us with two. Since an injury to one leg ten years ago she has been confined to her rocking chair. She never gripes; takes the food brought to her, with thanks; rests when they place her upon the bed each forenoon and afternoon, and when callers come in they find her up to date, witty, and apparently as happy as the rest of them.

What I like most about her is that she never says "Why do I have to linger like this," or "Well, soon I'll be out of your way." She lives for today and those around her, and there's plenty of sunshine beaming from her face. I could live with, and care for my mother-in-law "till the end of time" were it possible to take her away from her beloved environments. I look forward to hugging this dear old soul again this summer.

My husband was wonderful to his mother-in-law. Why can't we realize they are what we help to make them, and omit the criticism when we speak of anyone's mother-in-law? (Mrs. E., Texas)

## **She Has the Secret of Good Living**

Those who admire their mothers-in-law for the persons they are, often put their appreciation in terms of their feeling that she has learned how to live richly and fully. Two cases from California introduce this sentiment:

Every so often we are privileged to meet someone who is a real person and we feel blessed and refreshed just to have known them

for a short while—so imagine my delight to find such a one to be my mother-in-law. No, I didn't marry Jack just to make it so, but had I met Mom first I would have been tempted.

She has the eternal sparkle and humor of youth in her eyes. No matter how well she may have learned that silence is golden, her dancing eyes tell me she hasn't missed much. *She has the secret of good living*—an ability to be "at home" anywhere herself and to make you feel "at home" anywhere in her presence. With all the tribulations that go with living a full life she has remained an individual and yet retained all the warmth of a mother absorbed in loving care of her family. (Mrs. J., California)

My mother-in-law, first of all, is a person, alive and active. Her vision is not clouded by past events, nor is her appetite for life dulled by her many happy years. .

She recognized the unity of successive generations and seldom violates their privacy. Yet she enters into our activities with genuine enthusiasm.

When I least deserve it she treats me like a man, not a weasel. She respects my rights as head of the family and helps to maintain justice.

In short, my mother-in-law embodies those qualities almost impossible to combine—the wisdom of age, the eagerness of youth, and a deep respect for the rights of others. (Mr. C., California)

A gentleman in northern Alabama submits from the biography of his mother-in-law several experiences to document his point that she has found life full and made it good wherever she was through the years. His account of her life is in his own words:

My mother-in-law is the only mother I've ever known since my natural mother died when I was three years old. She was married on her nineteenth birthday, December 1, 1906, and left her home in Mobile, Alabama, to go to China with her twenty-three year old doctor husband as a medical missionary's wife. They arrived in San Francisco not long after the Great Earthquake and Fire. There were no hotel accommodations. The young doctor left his December bride on the docks alone while he walked his way back to Oakland to try to locate their luggage. Kind sailors found her on her knees behind a hawser crying, "Lord, oh Lord, why did You let me come off this long way from home with a strange man?"

This inauspicious beginning of a long and happy marriage gives no indication of my mother-in-law's tremendous adaptability. In

later years, as the wife of the Professor of Surgery of the Rockefeller Foundation Medical College in Peking, she met and charmed many of the great men of the medical world of the 1920's. And as the daughter of a Baptist minister, she had never sampled the fruits of the vine from a bottle. But, being a smart girl, she soon observed at large and dull diplomatic dinners that the people who sipped from small glasses had more conversation to throw out than the others. She told me many years later, "Luke, take advantage of anything to help you out of bad spots as long as you're sure that it can't possibly hurt anyone else."

She has lived in small towns and large cities of two continents. She has never failed to make her personality and humour felt by all who have known her, and I sincerely mean this without consideration of color of skin or religious beliefs.

And now, at sixty-five, she is living in an iron ore mine camp of Alabama, and she is making life brighter for everyone fortunate enough to know her. Her present interest is a newly established workshop for handicapped persons. Perhaps the fact that one of her children is handicapped by cerebral palsy encouraged this interest, but her enthusiasms have seldom been dictated by personal problems. (Mr. L., Alabama)

One final illustration in this section comes from the grateful pen of a woman who reports that her mother-in-law shared her goodness of living not only with her son but also with her:

. . . she does not smother-mother us. She brought her son up to be a good husband and left him free to be one even tho he was her baby. And she took the raw material that was me and shaped it into an adult.

Over the years she has budgeted her life so she is never a burden on any of us be it financial, social, mental or emotional. Each is a free soul but each of us bound with real love.

My mother-in-law accepts whatever comes her way gracefully yet leaves her touch of beauty on it. She lives and lets live. Helps not hinders. My mother-in-law is a shining example that has stood the test of life and its vari-hued circumstances. This is why I offer her as undisputable proof that mother-in-laws are grand people. (Mrs. B., Oregon)

### **I Hope That I Can Be as Good a Mother-in-Law**

Many women are so appreciative of their mothers-in-law that they want to be just like them when they too attain that status.



It is possible that the tradition of being a good mother-in-law runs in some families. As such, it is a powerful force in positive in-law relations. As some women feel it:

I have always thought that it would be nice if some of her [mother-in-law] goodness would brush off on me. When I'm a parent I hope so much that I can pass on that wonderful touch of "Our Mom." (Mrs. A., Ohio)

She has even taken in my side of the family with open arms, and there's nothing nicer than knowing that your parents and in-laws are congenial with one another.

Having a married daughter of her own to love and give happiness to hasn't in one way kept her from doing the same for me, for which I am most grateful! She has told me that she wants always to do for me as she does for her own daughter. A person like this certainly must have a huge heart, with lots of love inside. For her these things aren't pretentious or the least bit of an effort, but just as natural as sunshine.

To my husband—her son—she is as a mother should be—loving and thoughtful. Her main concern is always for her children! What more could a daughter-in-law ask for.

In my mother-in-law I have gained a true friend—one whom I can depend upon always—no matter what.

When I become a mother-in-law myself, my one hope is that I can *half* way measure up to what I think is the perfect mother-in-law—my own! (Mrs. J., California)

She was a gentlewoman of New England, with a gracious and kindly air. She was interested, but not inquisitive; appreciative, but not demanding. She was a lady, and she was my mother-in-law. It was good to know her, especially so because my own Angel Mother was no longer with me. And during vicissitudes, yes even in my differences with her son, she could not have been more loyal to me, had she been my own mother. She, too, is now a memory, but I am happy to pay this sincere tribute to her. And it is my hope that someday some girl—of my son's choosing—may think of me as tenderly as I remember that dear lady who was my mother-in-law. (Mrs. J., Illinois)

### **She's a Vital, Growing Person**

If we are ever to lick the mother-in-law problem one of the things we will have to do is to encourage middle-aged and older

women to live lives of their own. Only then, can they find the satisfactions that go with development, and avoid the pitfalls that are inevitable in clinging to one's children for fulfillment.

This is a quality of life that some women have found for themselves. Some of the most encouraging of all the cases reviewed in this study are those in which the mother-in-law is a vigorous person full of the joy of living and busy at her own life tasks.

It is interesting that so many men and women are openly articulate in their appreciation of this quality in their mothers-in-law. It was not long ago that most adults agreed that "woman's place is in the home." The derision that met the efforts of the suffragettes has been mirrored since in the ridicule that many an active woman experiences just because she insists upon being a person in her own right. So, it is encouraging to find so many men and women aware of the importance of a life of her own for their mothers and mothers-in-law. Even more, to find so much open admiration of older women who continue to be growing persons is gratifying.

A daughter-in-law in Tennessee pays her mother-in-law this compliment, pertinent to our discussion:

I like my mother-in-law because she has grown old gracefully, maturing mentally. She has her own circle of friends, and leads a full life of her own, finding time for her own family when needed. She doesn't mind being a grandmother, doing the endless small irritating tasks which require patience and time (like shelling peas, putting on a missing button or darning socks). She has a sympathetic ear, and you get a feeling of strength kindred to finding the correct answer yourself after talking things over with her. She believes life is a school in which she too is a student, and gives a sense of security that you have a friend willing to share from her own vast store of amusing experiences. She has never lost her sense of humor or the ability to laugh. I hope someday to be the same type mother-in-law. (Mrs. H., Tennessee)

In conclusion, we have selected portraits of two women whose lives have elicited the admiration of their sons- and daughters-in-law. The first word picture comes from a woman

in Missouri who feels that her mother-in-law's ability to encourage the individuality of those around her is related to the vitality of her own growing personality:

My mother-in-law is a swell gal. Maybe first of all, a mother-in-law should be a person in her own right, an individual with her own vital personality and life to lead. Then she never needs to fulfill her own life by imposing on her own children and their spouses—spice? (mouse—mice) nor does she let them impose upon her.

A relationship can only be a happy one, whether by blood or marriage or, more distantly, by a child's marriage, if that relationship allows expansion and vitality instead of cramping or squeezing the other's life.

That is the reason my mother-in-law is a wonderful person. Her two sons-in-law, both M.D.'s, love her, enjoy her company, and admire her intelligence. So do her two daughters-in-law, including me. Her eight grandchildren and four great grands (so far) love their Granny of Grannywood. She recognizes each for his or her own personality and never expects or plaintively seeks uniformity among them.

She has spurred us all on! Her own confidence and energy *and* her words have said, "You can do it. You're a wonderful son or daughter." Fully as often has that been said to the in-law son or daughter as to her own. Never is there a shade of difference or discrimination.

As Public Health Director of Atlantic County Public Health Service in New Jersey, she approaches all people tactfully, graciously, and warmly. Local politicians respect her judgment and crippled children and others needing welfare assistance love her. For many years, annual picnics of the YWCA, the Crippled Children's Home, the Republican Women, etc., etc., were held at Grannywood and testified to the size and warmth of her heart as well as of her home and grounds.

Even a blind eye and a game ankle did not curb her spirit for a long time. Now her health imposes limited activity and Granny conducts most of her office supervision from her bed.

She is still a wonderful mother-in-law. Long distance telephone calls come regularly to keep us in touch. One proof of her deep love and understanding for me came when her son, my husband, died. "You should marry again. You're a young woman." If ever I were to do so, our first trip would be to see Granny of Grannywood. My turn will be coming up soon when my daughter marries. I only hope I can do half as well. (Mrs. D., Missouri)

The portrait that is shared below is that of the woman whose life inspired not only this study but the author's life as well. As much as any words can, these reveal the eternal spirit of growth and vitality that characterized her whom we were proud to call our mother-in-law. The daughter who knew her best penned these lines the day she died:

#### THE LIFE OF OUR MOTHER

It seems our mother cannot die  
The space she left is piled so high  
With eagerness to learn the "why"  
Of Time and Tide. Her thoughts had wings  
To light on consequential things . . .  
Her readings, lined with pencilings,  
Her scrapbooks crammed with all her years  
Of cartoons, comments, smiles and tears . . .  
(She read the papers with her shears  
In hand) What lecturers she heard,  
Her notes recorded every word:  
And when untoward events occurred  
She met them head on . . . gallantly:  
And every scrap and snap-shot she  
Collected of her family  
Surrounded her, in clips or frame  
Upon her walls . . . each well-loved name . . .  
She held her children all the same  
In love and pride. Her joy in life,  
To try to heal the hurts of strife  
And analyse the errors rife  
In government at home, abroad!  
She gave no quarter to the laud  
Of mediocrity. Her God  
Was everlastingly AWARE  
And strong enough to meet a dare!  
She had her own idea of prayer  
And used it daily for her need:  
Her fruitful life has proved indeed  
The power and promise of her creed.  
She kept eternal thoughts close by,  
Her spirit compassed earth and sky . . .  
It seems our mother cannot die!

(Beth Duvall Russell)



**Summary**

Twenty-five per cent of all men and women who submit documents on their mothers-in-law say they appreciate the kind of person she is. They send in many colorful illustrations to corroborate their feeling that she is an all-round fine person. Both men and women report that they find their mothers-in-law good to live with. Men seem to be especially appreciative of mothers-in-law who are understanding and sensitive of their feelings. Men and women alike admire mothers-in-law who are generally kind and helpful to others.

Courage through hardship is a theme that appears in the tributes paid to some mothers-in-law. Other persons elaborate on the way in which their mothers-in-law rise above trouble to bring poise and peace to situations and persons nearby. There is a goodly number of documents from men and women who feel that their mothers-in-law have the secret of good living, and that being near her is a blessing in itself. Daughters-in-law frequently say that they hope they can be as good mothers-in-law as they have had.

Most suggestive are the documents that come from men and women who especially appreciate the fact that their mothers-in-law were vital, growing persons. Such encouragement to older women to be persons in their own right should go far to solve the so-called mother-in-law problem. Greater still is the influence of those women whose lives have been monuments to a way of life that, being built on continuing growth, is of the future.

Several researchable questions appear in this section of the study:

1. Why are there regional differences in the frequency with which men and women express as their predominant sentiment their appreciation for mother-in-law as a person?
2. What kinds of mothers-in-law are good to live with; and who finds them good?
3. Is the family tradition of being a good mother-in-law an

appreciable influence in maintaining good in-law relationships? Do good in-laws "run" in families, as our data seem to suggest?

4. Who are the people who are intellectually and emotionally disposed to encourage the middle-aged and older woman to pursue her own interests and develop her personality in her own way? What age, sex, social-class, religious, educational, ethnic differences would we find between groups in this tendency? Would they be the developmentally oriented adults we found in our earlier studies (Duvall, "Conceptions of Parenthood," *American Journal of Sociology*, November, 1946)?

## Mother-in-Law as a Grandmother

**B**ABIES MAKE MOTHERS-IN-LAW into grandmothers. But grandchildren rarely clarify the roles that mothers-in-law play. On the contrary, the expectations about what it means to be a good grandmother seem to be many and varied. Mixed feelings about mother-in-law as a grandmother range from fear that she will be bad for the children to warmest appreciation for her rich contribution to their lives. This chapter summarizes current opinions about grandmother, actual experiences persons report with her and their sentiments about her, and concludes with suggestions for putting grandmotherhood on a sounder basis in our culture.

### **Some Authorities Say Grandmothers Are Bad for Children**

Many people consider Grandma a bad influence. An article appearing in a professional journal is entitled, "Grandma Made Johnny Delinquent."<sup>1</sup> In it two cases of problem children from a juvenile court are analyzed, with the conclusion that the cause of the delinquency was the presence of the father's mother in the home. The author recommends the removal of the grandmother from the home as the answer to the problem.

Another author writing in the same journal says, "Grandmothers exert an extraordinarily pernicious influence on their

grandchildren.”<sup>2</sup> He goes on to say that this is inherent in the nature of the relationship of grandmother to mother and grandchild. If the grandmother cares for the child, she relives being a mother and attempts to cling to the child. She tends to fight against the mother to hold the child’s affection. Furthermore, since grandmother’s personality is fixed, her ideas of child-rearing are inflexible and she cannot co-operate in bringing up the child in the modern manner. This is a strong indictment against grandmother, and will bear some exploration.

A popular author writes in the same vein in a syndicated Sunday Supplement in an article entitled, “10 Mistakes Grandparents Make.”<sup>3</sup> He details the grandparent problem by listing ten shortcomings of grandparents:

1. Too much baby talk
2. Picking up baby when he cries
3. Feeding the child without parents’ consent
4. Paying the child to do his duty
5. Too many gifts
6. Challenging a parent’s decision
7. Too much pampering
8. Punishing child without parental consent
9. Encouraging a child to outwit his parents
10. Failing to share their accumulated wisdom

There is very little hope held out for grandparents’ ability to change their ways. One educator is quoted as saying, “Every human being learns from experience with one exception—the grandparent.” This rephrasing of the old saw, “You can’t teach an old dog new tricks,” appears in many forms, and expresses the folk opinion that older people are rigid and incapable of adapting to new situations. Would this stand up in objective research?

Popular conceptions of grandmotherhood is a promising area for further study. An article in the *Journal of Gerontology* entitled, “Contemporary Opinions: Grandmothers Are Guinea Pigs,”<sup>4</sup> offers some provocative hypotheses.

Some students of the grandparent question<sup>5</sup> suggest that it



is when three generations share the same home that problems with grandparents are most critical. They also point out that problems with grandparents are anticipated in the parent-grandparent relationship that goes back through the years.

Edith Stern and Mabel Ross, in their book, *You and Your Aging Parents*,<sup>6</sup> detail one aspect of the problem when they say, "Most aging men and women find it fairly easy to be the ideal grandparent when they see their grandchildren only occasionally. But when three generations live under the same roof, the charm of the youngest for the oldest is liable to wear off very soon—often, indeed, within a few days."

### Scant Evidence of Grandmother Difficulties in This Study

In the light of this general supposition of the difficulties caused by grandparents, it is interesting to note that grandmother comes in for very little criticism in the several phases of our investigation. The category, "Mother-in-Law Is the Children's Grandmother" had the fewest number of mentions in our analysis. Forty-eight men and women out of the total 3,683 (1.3%) gave this as their predominant sentiment, and in most of these cases the experiences and feelings were positive and appreciative. Of the 1,337 persons who participated in the group interview phase of this study, only 7 individuals specifically mentioned grandparents as being difficult.

This lack of criticism of grandmother is general in our study. An even distribution of comment comes from the various subgroups, as is seen in Table 8. Of the men who participated, 1.2% gave this as their predominant sentiment, a proportion remarkably similar to the 1.3% of the women in the same category. Urban, 1.1%, and rural, 1.6%, mentions in this area are also similar. Regional differences are slight, ranging from 0.7% (North Central) to 1.9% (West), with no significant differences between them.

TABLE 8  
MOTHER-IN-LAW IS THE CHILDREN'S GRANDMOTHER:  
PREDOMINANT SENTIMENT

<i>Region</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Urban</i>	<i>Rural</i>	<i>Total Num- ber</i>	<i>Per Cent</i>
North Central	1	7	4	4	8	0.7
North East	2	6	5	3	8	1.0
South	4	14	12	6	18	1.7
West	4	10	5	9	14	1.9
Total	11	37	26	22	48	1.3
Number	940	2,743	2,299	1,384		
Per Cent	1.2	1.3	1.1	1.6		

When grandmothers are mentioned in this study, it is usually with appreciation and affection. Large numbers of men and women mention incidentally that they count upon their mothers-in-law to serve as baby-sitters when they are away. These mentions, being secondary, are not counted in the predominant sentiment that is statistically analyzed here. The very fact that so many are so casual about these baby-sitting functions of the children's grandmother may mean that this is one role in which the grandmother is pretty much taken for granted.

### **She Stays with the Children and They Love It**

Many mothers and fathers are eloquent in their appreciation of their mothers-in-law's function as grandparents. They go on in considerable detail on how grandmother eases the burdens of parenthood by staying with the children when the parents slip away for a while. From the way some of these commendations are phrased, one gets the distinct impression that grandmothers do more than "sit" in most instances.

I love my mother-in-law and she loves me. Last week, I lived luxuriously while on a business trip with my husband; sleeping late, dining at smart restaurants and sight seeing in the big stores all because mother thought a change would be good for me and she was willing to leave her quiet, peaceful home to come to mine, to cook

and clean and wait on three lively youngsters. But that is mother—always thinking of others instead of her own.

The children were positively glad to see us go, for they would have Grandma to tell them stories and bake cookies for them.

We can go out for an evening, perfectly relaxed, knowing that our children are in safe and loving hands. My mother-in-law is as indispensable to us as our daily bread and she says the same of us and I believe her, for her heart is overflowing with affection and love. (Mrs. R., Michigan)

Whenever I need help—and the mother of four lively youngsters ages 14 months to 5 years often needs help—she [mother-in-law] never hesitates—just says, "All right, what's to be done?"—and does it.

When I had the last baby she came and took over the other three and my housework for the week I was in the hospital with practically no help from my husband, who was starting a new job and was home only for breakfast and supper and to sleep. She stayed on, doing most of the work, for almost three weeks after my homecoming. All this despite the fact she does not get around easily herself due to severe varicose veins.

And that is only one instance. There have been many others.

Need I visit the dentist—she takes the four villians into her home while I go and besides prepares dinner for us (and daddy). She and grandpa come over and take over our house and family for a day several times yearly so daddy and I can visit friends in another city.

And when we try to thank her she says, "What good are parents if they don't help out their children—and grandchildren!" (Mrs. C., Wisconsin)

A practical-minded father in Pennsylvania computes the actual saving in cold cash in having mother-in-law on tap to serve as grandmother-sitter when he says:

In these days of high taxes and inflation, we always value anything of lasting economic value. Following my return to civilian life in 1946, after almost three years in the U. S. Navy, I was unprepared for the financial demands of a wife and two small children. Baby sitters formed a capitalistic union so that a fifty cent movie cost \$3.00, while a simple dinner or a dance required major financing.

My mother-in-law made the mistake of volunteering her services as far as the kids were concerned and since that time we have imposed upon her good nature at regular intervals for a period of over six years. Based upon one outing per week for a period of four years, at a rate of seventy-five cents per hour before midnight and \$1.00 after midnight (we always get home at 1 A.M.), for a total of

three hundred and twelve weeks, I estimate that we have saved \$1,014. If we can keep my mother-in-law in good spirits and good health we should be able to conserve sufficient funds over the next few years to finance at least two years of college for each child. Of course, this fund will be greatly enhanced if the same rate is applied to the two-week vacation my wife and I enjoy each year while grandmother takes over. We don't count medical or resuscitation costs which are usually necessary for my mother-in-law during the two weeks immediately following this vacation. (Mr. B., Pennsylvania)

### **Grandmother Steps In When Mother Dies**

A number of cases indicate the essential role children's grandmothers play when the mother dies. It is then that Grandma steps in and brings up the children, to the lasting gratitude of sons and sons-in-law who were widowed and left with children to rear. The point is clear and need not be labored. One case alone suffices to illustrate it:

Mrs. W. and her husband reared three fine children in Nebraska in the face of droughts, dust storms and depression. They had only a modest rented farm home, but love and kindness abounded.

In 1935 I married their oldest daughter. She and I and our two children moved to California in 1943; where in 1945 my dear wife passed away after having given birth to my third child.

I faced a problem of how the children should be taken care of while I worked in a defense plant. . . .After we had laid my wife to rest in Nebraska, my mother-in-law volunteered that she and her husband would sell their holdings in Nebraska and go with me to California to take care of the children . . . they have been doing a fine job of it ever since, without any compensation whatever except the love and adoration of my children and myself. (Mr. B., California)

### **Children Need Grandparents**

In the normal course of events, children need grandparents to add richness, perspective, and fullness to life, say many men and women. One eminent anthropologist observes that in societies where grandparents are normally close to the children, there is much more of the relaxed, leisurely teaching of the



culture than in our typical homes where mother and father are busy and grandparents are too far away to serve these functions.

"Tell me about the olden days when you were young," beg many children whenever they can get their grandparents' attention. This close first-hand touch with the past gives youngsters the historical perspective in a world of change that is valuable, and difficult to obtain otherwise.

Just three comments from our families are selected to represent the sentiment of men and women who believe that grandparents are needed by their children:

Mothers-in-law can be very important people in the family group. Children need their grandparents and their lives can be richer for the knowing and loving of them. The place of grandmother is an honored one. When more parents realize this, they will make allowances for the varied personalities of mothers-in-law. (Mrs. M., Oregon)

. . . without my mother-in-law my two little ones would not have the privilege of knowing and loving a gracious grandmother. (Mrs. M., Idaho)

Take all the mothers-in-law away and little children could not go home to grandmother's house on Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Years, and Easter. Take mothers-in-law away and junior or sister or both could not go to grandmother to stay. . . . (Mrs. L., Idaho)

Much has been said about the relief from their children that grandparents provide for parents. Little usually is said of the need children may have for some relief from their parents. It is quite possible that grandparents serve a real purpose in providing for children a different touch, another approach, a new setting and emotional climate that is not possible in the day-in-day-out contact with parents alone. "She scolds so soft," comments one little boy in comparing his grandmother's discipline with that to which he is accustomed at home. That soft scolding might be called pampering by some. But to the little fellow in question it seems to be a pleasant respite from the normal rough and tumble of life with his own parents.

### **She Enriches the Lives of the Children**

One of the services grandmother performs is in giving young children an experience of visiting outside their own home. Bossard <sup>7</sup> reports that grandparents are the relatives children most frequently visit, and that the majority of children enjoy these visits to their grandparents. Parents comment freely on the many other ways in which a grandmother enriches their children's life. She sees that the whole family gets away for pleasant trips and vacations together, sometimes by renting a summer cottage, sometimes by arranging a travel jaunt that would not have been possible for the grandchildren and their parents without grandmother's help.

Grandmother plays the role of official escort to places of interest for many a child. Parents are grateful for the way in which she takes her grandchildren to zoos, museums, children's plays, special musical programs, and to church with her. She opens up whole new worlds of music and art and geography and science and nature for children whose own parents are too busy to perform these time-consuming functions as freely as they might. For, parents of young children are pre-occupied with many things in the support and maintenance of a home in its expanding stage, things that do not fill the lives of the woman whose own children have grown and who now has time to give her grandchildren. As one father puts it, "I'd feel guilty about all my sons weren't getting to see if it weren't for their grandparents who take them everywhere with them, and give them a breadth of education I never could, now when I'm so busy."

A mother in the Midwest tells of the practice of her husband's mother who takes each grandchild on his tenth birthday for a week's tour of New York City. Except for these birthday celebrations none of the children has been East. But after their tenth birthday something so new and wonderful has been added to their lives that the younger brothers and sisters fairly stretch out of their shoes to get to be ten too.

### **Friction with Grandmother in the Family**

There must be something behind the folk wisdom which says that grandmothers spoil children. Social workers and family experts have some experiences in mind when they advise against three generations being too closely associated. Even though the actual cases that have turned up in this study are few in number, they do give some insight on the ways in which grandmothers may make things difficult.

A young mother describes some of the difficulty she and her husband had in living with his parents when their boy was just a baby. It seems that her mother-in-law did not like males of any age. She treated her husband like dirt. She had always neglected her boys and shamefully favored her girls. When it was necessary for this oldest boy of hers to come back home for a while when his baby was young, her first comment was, "Well, come along then, though I do wish the baby weren't a boy too." Never did the baby's grandmother pick him up but that she would make some disparaging remark about him. The baby seemed to sense it and would cry whenever she touched him. The situation finally became so bad that the young family moved out into a tent until their own home was ready. Rather than the grandmother's unfortunate influence on their son, was their feeling.

A woman in Florida has a boy away at college and a nine-year-old daughter at home with herself, her husband, and her husband's mother. She defines her greatest problem as "The Grandmother Situation," as she says:

I want this child to love and respect her grandmother but this seems to be very difficult. She feels it her duty to express her opinion about everything which comes up in regard to the child and her methods are very old-fashioned. My husband resents this attitude and there is continual friction between him and his mother. This is affecting the child and must be worked out, but how? I am endeavoring in every way I know to establish a greater sense of unity in the home, a greater sense of friendliness and companionship between all the members. (Mrs. A., Florida)

The problem of mixed feelings and attitudes across three generations is a complex one in many homes. Some parents say that they feel as though they live in a buffer state between two warring worlds of their children's and their parents' making. Others express their annoyance over the grandmother's behavior in ways that leave no question about the friction she causes in the home.

A young teacher in Los Angeles says that the most difficult in-law relationship he knows is that of the grandmother who intrudes and insists on becoming active in his family affairs. He says that she gives too much parental advice, that she criticizes the home, and that she doesn't let him and his wife bring up their children as they feel they should.

Another teacher in upstate New York tells us that his wife was raised by her grandparents and that his grandmother-in-law is "a pain in the neck" because she is "domineering, over-protective and scheming."

In one of the Baptist churches of Kansas City is a young father who says that his greatest in-law problem is the grandmother and that he wishes she would be more considerate of the planning that is done for her, by her children and grandchildren.

In general then, even though many people report that they appreciate all grandmothers do in helping rear the children, there are times when the three-generation situation becomes particularly difficult. Several suggestions can be advanced to interpret "grandmother trouble."

### **Reasons Why Grandmother Finds Herself in Emotional Hot Water**

First, is the difference in values and ways of life between the generations in a rapidly changing culture. These differences are especially intense in child-rearing practices. It is sometimes hard for members of the older generation to keep up to date on the expected behavior of children and youth, and so they impose outmoded ideas in the rearing of their grandchildren.



Second, is the fact that while parents are responsible for the disciplining and guiding of the child, grandparents, by definition in our culture, are not so limited and so are free to enjoy their grandchildren with a unique freedom; unique in that it is not available to parents as to grandparents, and unique in that it is new to the grandparents themselves. When they brought up their own children, they were bound by the expectations and demands of parenthood. But now, in their relationships with their grandchildren, they are free to enjoy the children as persons.

Third, children often respond to these mutually free relationships with their grandparents with a great deal of spontaneous affection that may be threatening to the mother. The mother may understandably feel that since it is she who must do all the "spiritual dirty work" in rearing the children to do what they should, it is she whom they should love most. And then, she sees her children favoring the grandmother who has not been burdened with all the details of their care and upbringing, and she resents the affection her children shower upon her mother or her husband's mother.

This role of the "other mother" is frequently a difficult one. Mothers often resent the child's teacher at school out of a feeling that she is in competition for the child's love. As the mother sees it, here she has raised this child through the years to the place where he can go to school, and then within the first few days he seems to love his teacher with an intensity and devotion that makes his mother envious. From the child's point of view this is understandable. He is actually making a good adjustment to school in transferring some of his love toward his mother to his "other mother," his teacher.

Dr. Frances Horwich, the "Miss Frances" of *Ding Dong School* fame, tells an interesting anecdote that illustrates the power of the sentiment. She was flying to the West Coast in an early spring storm in which the plane was late and the passengers, including a number of young children, were upset and unhappy. One of the mothers, recognizing "Miss Frances," approached her with the request that she take the preschool

youngsters to the lounge in the rear of the plane and amuse them while the tired mothers had a nap. Miss Frances obliged and gave the little travelers a good time for an hour. When the mother who made the original request returned to the lounge for her child, she found her young son cuddled up on Miss Frances' lap thoroughly enjoying this new friend of his. He refused to go to his mother when she held out her arms for him, but clung ever more tightly to Miss Frances. Whereupon the mother burst into an angry attack, the main focus being on how unfair it was for Miss Frances to win his affection in one brief hour when she, his mother, had given him her whole life.

And, so it goes with many a grandmother. She "does for the grandchildren" and wins their response. But alas, in doing so she runs the danger of becoming a competitor in the mother's eyes, and loses her closeness with her grandchildren, as well as with their parents.

Parents can be very grateful, up to a point. But when the "outsider," whether teacher, nurse, counselor, mother-in-law, or even one's own mother, becomes so close that the intimate parent-child relationship is threatened, then it is that the parent lashes out in an effort to protect the fundamental integrity of his or her home.

Finally, is the grandmother's need for love, attention, response, and a sense of being needed. If she is a lonely person for whom life has thinned out to a meager trickle, she may be particularly susceptible to the tendency to "spoil" her grandchildren. Whereas, if she has kept her life a deep flowing stream of good living after her children have grown, she is not as vulnerable as far as her ongoing relationships with her married children are concerned. She faces, then, the paradox that is as old as motherhood—those whom she holds too tightly, she loses; while those whom she lets go, are not afraid of being close.

### **Grandmothers Themselves Are Confused**

Grandmothers are generally concerned about their roles. They are confused about what is expected of them. And often they do not know where to turn to find life meaningful. This seems to be true of grandmothers in all walks of life, but particularly those in which women are not expected to work outside the home. Not long ago a letter arrived on monogrammed stationery from a smart Boston suburb. To the letter was stapled a newspaper clipping reporting one of the author's addresses in which the point had been made that one of grandmother's problems is that she is no longer needed as she once was, now that her children have grown. The writer of the letter put her appeal simply:

Do you have any literature you could send me on what a grandmother could do so as not to seem so very lost? I would so appreciate your help. (Mrs. G., Massachusetts)

This is not an isolated call for help. The 1,500 women over forty years of age whose stories Dr. Anderson<sup>8</sup> analyzed sound this same theme is a rising crescendo. They responded as one woman to the challenge they face as middle-aged women in finding a place for themselves in a world that has gone on without them while they were raising their children. They wondered how they could sharpen their salable skills, set aside twenty years or more ago when they found themselves with children to raise as only a mother can. They asked where it was that they belonged now that their families had grown, and their husbands engrossed in business affairs. Or if the man of the house had died, things were worse than ever for those grandmothers. They wanted to be independent, and dreaded having to live with their married children. But all too often that was the only alternative. They all wanted their grandchildren to love them, but were almost afraid of the intensity of their own need for affection. They were confused, and they knew it!

Aging parents, grandparents, and in-laws in the family constitute a social problem as well as a personal one for millions

of us as Americans. Now when there are increasing numbers of men and women over 65 years of age in the population of the United States, we face, as we never have before, the question of the status of our aged and the aging. Shall they be encouraged to work? If so, on what basis? Where shall older family members live, and with whom, and with what privacy and companionship assurance? How shall the health and recreation of older family members be programed? What economic, personal, emotional security can they find in the modern world?

The problem is not a temporary one. The tendency for the aging parts of the population to increase with each succeeding decade may be expected to continue with the ongoing advances in medical science. Both a social and a personal problem, on an immediate as well as a continuing basis, the question is therefore sharply focused, "What about Grandma?"

### **A Place for Grandmother Among Us**

We shudder at tales of the northern people who leave their aged out to die in the cold. Yet, our own aging parents and grandparents are "out in the cold" in a very real way in our own culture. We need to find ways of saving grandmother from the loneliness of the empty years that follow the marriage of her children and the coming of her grandchildren. At the same time young families need to be safeguarded from the clinging possessiveness that today makes Grandma such a problem.

Widespread recognition of grandmothers as women with creative roles to play would help. With the modern conditions that call for closer family ties (Chapter 1) and more mutual help between the generations, must come a fuller acceptance of the older generation. This is particularly necessary in a culture as prejudiced as ours against the interaction of mothers-in-law and grandmothers with their children's families. Before we can expect women to enter these statuses gladly, we must do what we can to remove the stigma from them.



One step in this direction was taken by the New York City Council in 1952 in declaring the second Sunday in October each year as "Grandmother's Day."

Such public homage has its personal counterpart in practice of everyday respect of grandmother by her children and grandchildren. In many ways parents promote an attitude of respect for their elders within the spirit of the family. They are careful not to disparage their parents and parents-in-law in the presence of their children. They do not take for granted the many kindnesses of the children's grandmother, but in their own spirit of gratitude, as well as in their teachings, inculcate patterns of thankfulness for the richness that grandparents add to the life of the young family. They recognize that they and their children suffer from cutting off the family roots. So, they go out of their way to preserve the family traditions and to honor the older family members who represent the family heritage.

Respect for elders characterizes stable family life. As times change and the family undergoes severe disruption, as our American families have in recent decades, there is a strong tendency to break away from the old. Old ways, old concepts, old people, go in the discard. But it is possible, as life stabilizes around the new patterns that are being established, that some values of the old again may be incorporated into life ways. Then grandparents may be welcomed back into the family circle for the very real values they represent in family living.

### **Bringing Grandma up to Date**

Grandmother must be brought up to date if she hopes to win the respect and appreciation of her children and grandchildren. This means, among other things, that she must come to terms with the modern world and its ways and not resist too adamantly the change that she sees around her. Only as she remains actively involved in human affairs is she able to understand her children's children, speak their language, and be appreciative of their values.

Refresher courses for grandmother have a place in her continuing re-education. As she takes a course in child development, she may be reassured that she isn't so old-fashioned after all; for, there is much that grandmother may find encouraging in modern practices. She may enjoy Spock or Gesell quite as readily as does her daughter, and take to her rocking chair with a sick or sleepy child even more readily than she did with her own children reared in the behavioristic atmosphere of the twenties. As she studies into the fundamental nature of adolescence, she gains insight not only into her recent experiences with her own children, but is readied for understanding her grandchildren as teen-agers.

Family life education has something to contribute to a modern grandmother. As she catches the concept of the developmental task, she sees more clearly what the members of her family of all ages and stages are after, and is able more competently to give them the real rather than the speciously sentimental kind of help for which grandmothers are noted. As she feels her way through the implications of the family cycle, she is able to gain perspective in her own life as well as that of her children, and to come to terms with her own new roles that emerge as she enters grandmotherhood. As she learns the modern methods of sex education and of preparation for marriage, and parenthood, they make sense to her both in contrast to her own experience unsupported by such aids, and as tools to be used in her new relationships with the younger members of her family.

Further insight into the dynamics of family relations gives Grandma understandings into the roles that she plays with her married children and her grandchildren. Such insight helps her adapt her ways flexibly. She learns that her children continue to have needs as persons even after they marry and have children of their own. She recognizes those needs in her relationships with them. She develops the flexibility<sup>10</sup> in her own responses that makes for harmony in the family.

Of course, not every grandmother is ready for re-education. But, to assume that none are is a grave injustice. A great many

grandmothers today are breaking the old stereotypes of grandmotherhood. They are alive to new trends and are expert in applying newer insights in interpersonal and intrafamily relations.

Enlightened grandparents are sensitive to the importance of the parent-child relationship. They consult with the parents before making proposals for their grandchildren. By taking the mother and father into active participation in planning, the threats of envy and jealousy are largely avoided. The familiar conspiracy between grandmother and grandchild in which parents are left out is safe only when the basic relationship between the adults is fundamentally secure. Otherwise, the grandmother runs the danger of alienating the parents and losing contact with the young family.

Grandparents are free to enjoy their grandchildren when they do not compete with the parents for the children's affection and attention. They respect the integrity of the home in the close ties between mother-father-child, and do not threaten this elemental relationship in their relationships with the family.

Grandmother's role in disciplining the children of the family is a difficult one. If she goes counter to the mother's practice, she is undermining something important for both the child and the parent. If she challenges the parental discipline in front of the child, she is introducing the element of conflict. Yet, if she stands silently by and sees the child maltreated or neglected, she undergoes genuine discomfiture. Her best bet seems to lie in keeping close enough contact with the children's parents so that she may quietly discuss any matters that seem important with them from time to time. The mother who has brought up her children in this process of mutual consultation has built into the relationship the skills needed for dealing with such problems.

### **Let's Study the Grandmother Question**

Research into contemporary three-generational family living is urgently needed. Actually, we know very little about the

ways in which the three generations within the American small urban family work out mutually satisfying relationships. Patterns have been established through the centuries for the relationships of the large extended family in which the younger members follow in the ways of and obey the authority of the older generation. Before we can work out new patterns for the new ways of life in our time, we need answers to many questions that await the exploration of objective research.

Some of the questions that beg for further research in the material in this chapter are:

1. Are authorities agreed that grandmothers are bad for children? On the basis of what objective evidence?
2. How widespread is appreciation of grandmother's contribution to the young family?
3. Just what is expected of grandmother in American families? Who is a good grandmother, and what does she do?
4. How do children feel about their grandmothers? What do they like about their relationships with them? What do they find unpleasant?
5. What kinds of grandmother behavior make for trouble in the family?
6. How can a grandmother keep from seeming to compete with the mother for the child's affection?
7. What types of mothers feel most intensely the threats of such "other mother" figures as grandmothers, teachers, nurses, etc.?
8. How widespread is the emotional isolation of grandparents from the larger family? How much do grandparents feel "out in the cold" as far as satisfying interaction with other members of their families is concerned?
9. In what kinds of families is respect for elders practiced? In what ways?
10. How active are grandmothers in family life education programs already existent?
11. Is there evidence that grandmothers can learn more flexible roles with their children and grandchildren as



they gain insight into the dynamics of family relationships and child development? Or, are grandmothers too set in their ways?

12. Which grandmothers have a readiness for new learnings and for adopting new ways?
13. What roles may grandmothers play in the rearing of their grandchildren? Which are mutually satisfying and why? Which are stressful, and how may they be avoided?

### **Grandmotherhood Is Not a Career (Summary)**

Although some authorities say that grandmothers are bad for children, we find relatively little evidence of grandmother difficulty in our study. The majority of our cases appreciate the grandmother's role in the family for many reasons. She stays with the children and they love it. She steps in when a mother dies and brings up the children. She enriches the lives of her grandchildren in many ways difficult for parents.

Yet, there is friction in some families because of grandmother. She gets herself into emotional hot water with the family because she doesn't keep up to date, because she interferes in the disciplining of the children, and because she becomes a threat to the mother when the children love her too much. This is all very confusing to grandmothers. They report that they are lost and do not know what roles to play.

The increase in the aging parts of our population and the current needs for closer intergenerational ties in the family are challenges for improving the status of grandmother. We suggest that this can be done by wider recognition of grandmothers as women with creative roles to play, by more family practice of respect for elders, and by helping grandmother keep up to date through courses in child development, family relationships, and related areas that would give her insight into more flexible roles.

These suggestions are but hypotheses out of scattered evidence that calls for closer examination in objective and ex-

tensive research. More than a dozen questions for further study have emerged in this material that beg for intensive clinical and statistical exploration.

In general, our feeling is that grandmotherhood is not a career. But it can be a delightful hobby. As new flexible roles are learned it seems possible for the modern grandmother to enjoy her status without the hazards of emotional isolation for herself, or of the ego-depletion for her grown children so common today. Our greatest need may be not only for more extensive research but also for more pioneers who can cut through the deep undergrowth of grandmother stereotyping and find the paths that lead to peace in the larger family today.

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## How It Feels to Be a Mother-in-Law

ONE RARELY HEARS of how mothers-in-law feel. Discussions of what it means to be a mother-in-law are infrequent among most people. Yet, with mother-in-law roles as contradictory and as confused as they are in our country, it may be safely generalized that mothers-in-law experience a great many emotions in their relationships with their children-in-law. What these feelings are, and how they affect intra-family relationships, have not been studied until now. This chapter summarizes the two phases of the current investigation that focus upon how it feels to be a mother-in-law.

The first phase of this exploratory study was the interviewing of groups of men and women in which the questions were asked:

1. In your experience, which in-law relationship has been most difficult? and
2. What are three things this most difficult in-law does or does not do that makes him or her difficult? Or, if there have never been problems between you and your in-laws, to what do you attribute your family harmony?

### **Children-in-Law Are Not Often Criticized**

The most striking finding in this aspect of the study is that children-in-law are not often criticized. Although mothers-

in-law are generally criticized (as is seen in detail in Chapter 10), very few parents-in-law, when given the opportunity, say that their children-in-law are difficult. In this respect the in-law problem appears to be a one-sided one. The detailed data on feelings about children-in-law follow.

Out of the 1,337 men and women who participated in the group interview phase of this study, only 37 report that in their experience the daughter-in-law is the most difficult of in-laws. This is but 2.8% of the total. Men scarcely ever find their daughters-in-law troublesome; only one man in this sample reports his daughter-in-law as the most difficult of in-laws. These 36 women and one man name 86 criticisms of their daughters-in-law as causing trouble. This is 3.3% of all criticisms made of in-laws.

Son-in-law is even less frequently criticized. Only ten persons (0.7%) name him as their most difficult in-law. These ten men and women list 24 complaints of their sons-in-law, 0.9% of all in-law criticisms.

Together, sons- and daughters-in-law account for but 3.5% of the in-laws found most difficult by 1,337 men and women. They are criticized for but 4.2% of the complaints about relatives by marriage. Women only rarely mention difficulties with their children-in-law; and men scarcely ever.

Several tendencies are obvious in Table 9. The first is that daughter-in-law is more frequently criticized than is son-in-law. This is in line with the general findings of the study that women more than men relatives by marriage are felt to be troublesome.

The second general observation is that complaints of daughters-in-law range through fourteen of the fifteen categories of criticism made of in-laws. The percentages range from 2.3% to 22.1%, with differences insignificant because of the small numbers involved.

Sons-in-law are mentioned in but eight of the fifteen criticisms made of in-laws, with from one to six mentions per complaint. In seven areas in which in-laws sometimes offend, sons-in-law are not mentioned at all: rivalrousness, talkative-



ness, partiality, self-righteousness, misrepresentation, intrusion, and unconventionality.

TABLE 9  
DIFFICULTIES WITH DAUGHTERS- AND SONS-IN-LAW

<i>Criticisms Mentioned</i>	<i>Daughter-in-Law</i>			<i>Son-in-Law</i>		
	<i>Rank Order</i>	<i>Num- ber</i>	<i>Per Cent</i>	<i>Rank Order</i>	<i>Num- ber</i>	<i>Per Cent</i>
Indifference	1st	19	22.1	2nd	5	20.8
Thoughtlessness	2nd	14	16.3	1st	6	25.0
Incompetency	3rd	11	12.8	6th	2	8.3
Rivalrousness	4th	7	8.2	—	0	0.0
Criticalness	5th	6	7.0	7th	1	4.2
Interference	6th	5	5.8	3rd	3	12.5
Uncongeniality	7th	5	5.8	5th	3	12.5
Talkativeness	8th	4	4.6	—	0	0.0
Partiality	9th	3	3.5	—	0	0.0
Self-righteousness	10th	3	3.5	—	0	0.0
Misrepresentation	11th	3	3.5	—	0	0.0
Possessiveness	12th	2	2.3	4th	3	12.5
Immaturity	13th	2	2.3	8th	1	4.2
Intrusion	14th	2	2.3	—	0	0.0
Unconventionality	15th	0	0.0	—	0	0.0
Total		86	100.0		24	100.0

### Complaint of Distance in Children-in-Law

The two top-ranking criticisms of both sons- and daughters-in-law are that they are indifferent and thoughtless. These are both complaints that children-in-law are distant. Indifference includes such criticisms as:

My daughter-in-law is never at ease with me. She seems to consider me a financial asset rather than a love object. She rejects me when material help is not offered as freely as she wishes. (60-year-old Ohio woman)

She [daughter-in-law] acts very aloof usually. (44-year-old Mississippi woman)

He [son-in-law] should become less self-centered, and more interested in us. I wish he would honor or tolerate closer family ties. (55-year-old Ohio woman)

Daughters-in-law, and sons-in-law, too, should do what they can to make their in-laws feel that they are appreciated. (41-year-old Illinois woman)

Two elements stand out in these comments. One is that mothers-in-law are eager to establish close family ties with the new families created by the marriage of their children. They, therefore, want their children-in-law to accept them, to be interested in them, appreciate what they do for them, and feel close to the family.

The other apparent factor is the other side of the interference problem, in which children-in-law are known to object to the too-close-interest, and the well-meaning advice that they call meddling. This is the top-ranking complaint made of fathers- and mothers-in-law (Chapters 10 and 13). Here we find mothers-in-law saying they wish their sons- and daughters-in-law would more freely accept their advice and help.

This two-way problem is aggravated in our culture by the exaggerated emphasis upon independence among young married people at the same time that they find themselves in situations where they must accept help from their parents-in-law as well as their parents. Their gratitude, then, becomes a grudging one, and parents-in-law feel that they are rejected and unappreciated by married children who remain emotionally aloof.

### **Incompetency a Criticism of Children-in-Law**

The complaint of neglect of family responsibilities and of not doing her own job well ranks third, with 12.8% of the criticisms made of daughters-in-law, and sixth with 8.3% of all difficulties reported with sons-in-law.

This is the only time in this study that a man criticizes his daughter-in-law; a 59-year-old North Carolinian says of his daughter-in-law:

I wish she would not be so hard on the grandchildren, and I wish that she would not be so harsh with her husband.

Women mention the problem of harshness too, commenting upon the things that their daughters-in-law and sons-in-law do that make them the most difficult of in-laws. This may be the other side of the "spoiling, pampering, taking sides, showing partiality" problem that parents-in-law, especially mothers-in-law, are sometimes criticized for. Women express their concern for the incompetency of their children-in-law in the following additional ways:

I am trying to accept the fact that my daughter-in-law permits her children to be careless and to break articles of value—otherwise, she's a lovely girl. (60-year-old Indiana Extension worker)

I worry about her extravagance—but our relations are really very happy. (68-year-old Mississippi woman)

She always spends more money than she has—just no money value. (60-year-old Indiana woman)

I wish my son-in-law would stand by his wife when his family interferes. (45-year-old North Carolina woman)

The way the girl's mother-in-law softens her criticisms by such positively toned statements as "Otherwise she's a lovely girl," and "But our relations are really very happy" may give a clue to the infrequency of complaints about children-in-law. It is quite possible that rejection of one's children, so frowned upon in our culture, carries over to the place where it is difficult for parents-in-law to mention unfavorable characteristics of children-in-law.

It is possible too that men and women old enough to have married children may reflect the changes in concepts of discipline in past decades, changes which have occurred since mother-in-law brought up her children. So, too, may the problem of extravagance reflect changing economic conditions. The complaint of harshness attributed to the daughter-in-law may be the other side of the problem of parents and grandparents spoiling and pampering children, spotted earlier in this study.

Incompetency as a concern among parents-in-law may re-

flect their continuing concern for the welfare of son or daughter whose life is now in the hands of the spouse.

Before moving on to the less frequently mentioned criticisms of children-in-law, we note that these three top-ranking complaints total more than half of all mentioned for both children-in-law: 51.2% in the case of the daughter-in-law, and 54.1% of those attributed to the son-in-law. The general observation is that children-in-law are considered difficult when they are indifferent, when they are thoughtless of their in-laws, and when they appear to be incompetent and neglectful.

### **When Daughter-in-Law Is Jealous**

Sons-in-law are not mentioned as being jealous and rivalrous. But the problem ranks fourth for daughter-in-law, with 8.2% of the criticisms made of her. Two brief excerpts represent the difficulty women have with their daughters-in-law in this regard:

My daughter-in-law is jealous toward her sister-in-law and what she has—and she has been so good to her too. (60-year-old New Jersey woman)

She's just a little jealous and super-sensitive, Bless her heart. (68-year-old Mississippi woman)

Here again we have an attempt to soften the criticism with an accepting comment, "Bless her heart." This is a common tendency among the few complaints we have of children-in-law, and suggests the effort to be accepting of children by marriage even in the face of real criticism of them.

Jealousy and rivalrousness are women's problems, appearing not at all in any of the complaints of male in-laws, and almost always (four exceptions only) being reported by a woman. This probably represents the closer relationship (and the greater expectation of success in it) between the women of the family than is the case among the men.



### **Critical Daughters-in-Law**

Son-in-law is mentioned as being critical just once. Daughter-in-law is accused of being critical six times, or 7.0% of the complaints made of her. This is infrequent indeed in the 2,611 criticisms of in-laws made by the 1,337 men and women in the group interviews. But what the women say about the tendency of daughters-in-law to find fault may be of interest:

I wish my daughter-in-law would be more loyal to an already close, loyal large family. For instance, never make any personal criticisms of any member of her family to an outsider. We welcome any discussion of our faults and shortcomings among ourselves, but we keep them IN the family. (43-year-old North Carolina woman)

She might show more tolerance for others' viewpoints, and be a little less critical of us. (55-year-old Ohio woman)

She continually finds fault with everything, including her husband. (60-year-old Indiana woman)

The essence of this problem seems to be one of a desire for mutual acceptance, family loyalty and appreciation. Fault-finding is felt as rejecting, disruptive, and callously ungrateful. Women being exposed to opportunities for criticalness in their close day-by-day association in the family are more prone to be concerned about it than are the men of the family.

### **Interfering Children-in-Law**

Meddlesome children-in-law constitute a problem to older women. It does not loom large. Those who complain that their children-in-law interfere, meddle, are dominating and bossy, are women over sixty years of age.

Interference ranks sixth among criticisms of daughters-in-law, and third in those of sons-in-law, with an aggregate of nearly one in every five complaints of children-in-law (18.3%).

Interference is primarily a complaint made of mothers-in-law, fathers-in-law, and sisters-in-law, who together are re-

sponsible for 92.5% of all mentions of the problem. In contrast, children-in-law account for but 1.3% of the mentions of interference. In those cases where children-in-law are criticized as being meddlesome and dominating, they are middle-aged and their parents are in their sixties or older. Interfering children-in-law, then, represent basically a problem in geriatrics.

### Uncongenial Sons- and Daughters-in-Law

This problem is not one of high frequency. It ranks seventh for the daughter-in-law with 5.8% of complaints of her, and fifth for son-in-law with 12.5% of his criticisms. Both children-in-law account for less than 5% (4.9%) of the total mentions of uncongeniality.

Young people frequently complain that their parents-in-law were uncongenial, intolerant, and from different walks of life. But parents rarely mention uncongeniality as making for difficulty with their children-in-law. Men are not critical of their children-in-law in this regard. Women tend to comment not so much upon the uncongeniality of their children-in-law as upon the young person's intolerance of the difference between them. For instance, here are some verbatim comments:

I am a Methodist—wife of a Methodist minister. My daughter-in-law is Catholic. And, when friction arises between her and my son, she resents, strange to say, my taking her side and saying anything detrimental about my son. Then embarrassment ensues and she and the children stay away from me. (65-year-old North Carolina woman)

My son-in-law is rich and makes me feel uncomfortable in his presence. (65-year-old Kansas City Catholic woman)

I wish my daughter-in-law did not regard me as old-fashioned. (56-year-old Chicago nurse)

These reports illustrate the tendency of parents-in-law to refrain from actively complaining about the ways in which their children-in-law differ, but rather to somewhat wistfully wish that their sons- and daughters-in-law would more fully accept them as they are.

### **Talkativeness Is Not a Problem in Children-in-Law**

Talkativeness ranks eighth, with but four mentions in connection with the daughter-in-law. Sons-in-law are not criticized for the trait at all. This infrequency among children-in-law is in sharp contrast to the frequency of talkativeness complaints of elder relatives by marriage who together (mother-in-law, father-in-law, and sister-in-law) are responsible for 96.9% of it.

This may be further confirmation of the hypotheses that parents-in-law tend to accept their children-in-law more completely and less critically than sons- and daughters-in-law accept their elders. If this criticism of talkativeness is, as we have suggested, related to rejection of and annoyance with the person, the point holds.

### **Mother-in-Law Is Patient with Her Children-in-Law**

In seven of the fifteen categories of criticisms of in-laws, sons- and daughters-in-law are mentioned three times or less in the total of 2,611 criticisms. Not a single criticism is leveled at either son- or daughter-in-law for unconventional behavior. Only two mentions are made of the daughter-in-law's intrusion, and not one of the son-in-law. Daughter-in-law is criticized for being immature only twice, and son-in-law but once. Daughter-in-law is mentioned as being possessive twice and son-in-law but three times.

The complaint of lying, exaggerating, and misrepresenting facts is laid to the daughter-in-law's door but three times, and not at all attributed to the son-in-law. Daughter-in-law is mentioned as being self-righteous three times, son-in-law not at all. So too with partiality: three mentions for daughter-in-law, and not one for son-in-law.

This remarkable record of children-in-law hardly can be due entirely to their spotless character. Rather it must be the prejudiced eyes of parents-in-law that overlook so many of these human faults in interpersonal relationships. It is quite

possible that parents are more accepting of their children-in-law than the younger generation realize.

Parents-in-law certainly are less critical than are children-in-law, mention sons- and daughters-in-law significantly less frequently as problems, and list as complaints significantly fewer criticisms than members of the younger generation do of their parents-in-law.

One reason for this difference between the generations may be the taboo, which still holds in the older, of not talking about family problems outside the family. Young people no longer are so inhibited and so may more freely speak their minds and air their criticisms of their parents-in-law.

Another possible explanation is that fathers and mothers are more indulgent, more patient, and less prone to put their children's spouses in a bad light than are young husbands and wives, who show no such reticence in complaining about their parents-in-law. The important factor here may be that it is the young person who is struggling to attain independence and to establish his or her autonomy, and so is particularly sensitive to whatever the parent-in-law is or does that challenges his adequacy.

Parents, on the other hand, have enjoyed superior status in their relationships with their children through the years, and so they look now with varying degrees of intensity only to keeping somewhat close, as members of the larger family.

The over-all finding from this phase of the study is that mothers-in-law tend to be noncomplaining about their children-in-law. When they do find their daughters-in-law (and less often their sons-in-law) difficult, they most often mention indifference and thoughtlessness.

### **Mothers-in-Law Speak Up**

Further light on how mothers-in-law feel about their roles comes from their spontaneous response to a nationwide contest, directed not to them, but about them. When the network contest, "Why I Think Mothers-in-Law Are Wonderful Peo-



ple," was launched, nearly two hundred mothers-in-law volunteered their sentiments and experiences. These 193 mothers-in-law represented 5.2% of the total response, considerably higher than could have been anticipated in the nature of the situation. None of these mothers-in-law could have hoped to win the contest. They wrote as they did apparently because they were eager to discuss the mother-in-law role as they had experienced it.

These statements were focused directly on the mother-in-law's role as she herself felt it. Many more hundreds of responses came from women who themselves were mothers-in-law, but these other responses, not counted here, were directed to their feelings about their own mothers-in-law rather than upon what it means to be one. In each case the predominant sentiment in the document was the one that determined its placement in a given category.

By definition, all of the persons in this category were women. There were no significant differences in their urban-rural residence, and only slight differences in the region of the country from which they come, as seen below.

TABLE 10

HOW IT FEELS TO BE A MOTHER-IN-LAW:  
PREDOMINANT SENTIMENT, BY REGIONS

<i>Region</i>	<i>Total Responses from Region</i>	<i>Number of Responses from Mothers-in-Law</i>	<i>Percentage of Responses from Mothers-in-Law</i>
North Central	1,091	40	3.7
North East	826	47	5.7
South	1,039	60	5.7
West	727	46	6.3
Total U.S.A.	3,683	193	5.2

The slightly larger number of mother-in-law responses from the West might be interpreted as representing the larger number of older citizens resident there. Since a woman must be old enough to have married children in order to be a mother-in-law, this group is composed of middle-aged and older women. The

tendency of older persons to migrate to such states as California when their children have grown, means a larger proportion of them in the population there. A confirmation of this point is seen in the number of mother-in-law responses from Florida, in which there is also a concentration of older persons. Although the South as a region does not have a disproportionately higher number of responses from mothers-in-law (5.7%), 10% of the responses from Florida are from mothers-in-law.

### **Mother-in-Law Can't Win**

Many a mother-in-law sounds baffled, bewildered, and bitter in her role. She reports that anything she does is misconstrued by her sons- and daughters-in-law. If she leaves them alone, she is being neglectful; if she is nice to them, she is being two-faced; if she appears interested in what they are doing, she is meddling; if she keeps out of their affairs, she is not interested in them—she just can't win!

A mother-in-law in St. Louis volunteers her experience in this vein:

A mother-in-law must suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune thrust upon her by the union of her son or daughter to a naturally unworthy spouse. Thus dawns a new day in her life. For her alone, patience becomes a necessity, not a virtue. She must grin and bear it when the newlyweds have their first tiff. If, contrary to her own good judgment, she suggests her son's favorite recipe, she's domineering. If she buys her daughter a new dress, she's interfering. If she rocks her grandson, she's old-fashioned. If she doesn't, she's a square in baby-sitting circles. If she visits the newlyweds, she's a nosey pest. If she doesn't, she's strangely aloof.

Men have braved terrific odds to explore the vast unknown. But nowhere has their courage ever surpassed that required of a mother-in-law. . . . (Mrs. M., Missouri)

From Boise comes a statement from a mother-in-law who feels that the mother-in-law relationship tends to reflect the emotional climate of the marriage itself. She concludes by saying:

Sons or daughters-in-law provide an honest source of worry, which a mother-in-law bravely covers up. When her son or daughter is happy, the in-law is marvelous—when sad or hurt, the in-law is cruel, a cad—a nag or what have you. Mothers-in-law are wonderful! I am a mother-in-law—2 grand sons-in-law and 2 wonderful daughters-in-law. (Mrs. C., Idaho)

From every walk of life comes the lament that it is difficult to help sons- and daughters-in-law without putting a strain on the relationship. One woman gives a long story of her hard life, dropping out of school at an early age to help out by getting a job in a laundry, marrying before she really knew what life was all about, and then one child after another through the years. Her married children have “bled” her of everything she has, until now she is back in the laundry trying to eke out enough to take care of herself. She concludes with the simple signature, “Just a mother-in-law that has been through the Ringer, pennywise.”

In another case, a daughter of a middle-class family insisted upon an elaborate wedding that her widowed mother could afford only with great difficulty. But it was all very lovely and the couple went off on their honeymoon. They returned to their pleasant apartment only to have their rent raised to an impossible figure within the first few weeks. So again the mother-in-law stepped in, and mortgaged her home, to give the couple a substantial down payment on a house of their own. But, now, if the mother-in-law comes to the front door, her son-in-law leaves by the back. She understands that he may be embarrassed at being “beholden” to her; but the situation is hardly one that she finds comfortable.

Another girl married the son of well-to-do parents who provided a charming home and everything to go with it for the young couple at the time of their marriage. The girl's parents did all that they could to measure up to the match. But it wasn't enough. The second baby was born some weeks ago. As yet, the mother-in-law, a gracious woman, has not been invited into her daughter's home.

It isn't easy to be a mother-in-law!

## They Don't Like Me as I Am

Mothers-in-law often feel that their sons- and daughters-in-law do not like them. Sensing the rejection of their children's mates is a bitter pill to swallow, say a considerable number of mothers-in-law. One unhappy woman concludes her statement by revealing:

My only son married 2½ years ago—a girl I was very fond of, but who told my son that she did not like me. I told him to go ahead and marry her anyway, it was his happiness first. I will never let her know that I know how she feels about me; I do everything to make them both happy. . . . (Mrs. M., New Jersey)

A mother-in-law who feels that her children do not accept her as she is, reports:

I am a mother-in-law! Long ago I began to think about the "in-law" part of being a mother and I hoped my children would marry those who would take me as I am—as my children had done—and very well I might add. Certainly these "children-in-law" must have liked the finished product I worked on for 20 years or they would not have married my children.

Now the new members of the family want to make me over—not take me as I am. I saw my son-in-law 2 or 3 times 8 years ago and I don't meet with his approval. My daughter-in-law I have never seen but I don't seem to suit her either.

My method in trying to be a good mother-in-law has been to mind my own business, do anything I could to make the children happy and expect nothing. It has worked to the extent that I think they are happy. I am still minding my own business and my expectations have been fulfilled and I have nothing! Except in a few rare cases, I am quite sure the mother-in-law is only what the young people make her. (Mrs. M., Rhode Island)

Acceptance is a two-way process. The mother-in-law herself can only do part of the job of building harmony between the two generations. If her sons- and daughters-in-law reject her as a person, she can do little except avoid offensive behavior and practice a kind of gallant patience, acting as though all were well, until the time when they can accept her as she is. The set toward acceptance or rejection that children-in-law bring to their larger family relationships is a powerful factor



in determining the nature of the in-law adjustment. Those young people who have been negatively influenced by the mother-in-law stereotype, as many of them report they have, start with the handicap of mother-in-law rejection.

### **How It Feels to Do for Married Children**

In Chapter 6, we saw glimpses of the appreciation that young in-laws have for the services and gifts that mothers-in-law give. The other side of the story is not often told—how it feels to be of service as a mother-in-law. Let us start with a case of a run-away son who returned home just in time to draft his mother into active duty as mother-in-law and grandma, as she tells it:

. . . being a grandmother and mother-in-law usually grows on a person. But not in my case. I became both over night so to say. Let me explain further. My son ran away from home at the age of sixteen. I heard nothing from him for seven years until one lovely morning last July the door bell rang, and what happened? You guessed it. My son, wife and three adorable little boys.

The wife and children are still with me. My son is in the Army. I was planning on getting married myself, when this happened. The man I was planning to marry did not like the idea of becoming a grandfather so suddenly. We argued and he went off and got married to some one he had known only a few days. Did I have a nervous breakdown? I didn't have time. I moved into a larger place. Bought more furniture. My daughter-in-law works nights, and I work days, and we are getting along fine. (Mrs. L., Rhode Island)

A professional woman in the country outside of New York City reveals something of her feelings about being of service to her young people. That these are mixed feelings is evident when she says:

I think mothers-in-law can be pretty swell—and who should know better than I—I am one—I live in an old white farm house against a hill, with twenty acres of woodland, a river and a swimming pool, not to mention a strawberry patch and a two car barn. An hour and a half from New York it makes a lovely place for my town weary son and his wife to relax. I never mention weeds to be pulled, gutters to be cleaned, wood to be cut, screens to be taken down or put up. And when they leave Sunday afternoon with a carton of

farm produce to drive back to New York, I edge my way carefully past the piles of dirty dishes in the kitchen and start cleaning up. Yes, I think mothers-in-law can be pretty swell. (Mrs. R., New York)

In general, mothers-in-law realize that they are needed from time to time by their married children's families. In the main, they are glad to be of service, and gladly share what they have in time, goods, and money. But few of them like the feeling of just being used for what they have. Many of them report that they are willing to help out, to baby-sit and nurse, and cook and mend and lend money and all the rest, but that they do hate being taken for granted. They want what they do to be appreciated. And more than that, they want to be loved for themselves.

### **I Mind My Own Business**

Many mothers-in-law have been impressed with the importance of keeping out of their married children's affairs. The avoidance theme is one so familiar to mother-in-law that she often bends over backward keeping her distance from her married sons and daughters. One woman whose daughter had just married, with the greatest restraint kept from writing the young couple while they were on their ten-day honeymoon. Not having been a mother-in-law before, she felt it only appropriate to keep out of the picture while her daughter and son-in-law were enjoying their first days of marriage together. But, she was taken aback when the young couple returned to have them greet her with, "Why didn't you write? We looked in the box for a letter from you every single day."

A farm woman in upstate New York recognizes that times have changed so much since she was young, and that a woman is wise to live her own life and let her married children live theirs:

I have been one (a mother-in-law) for many years and a happy one too. It isn't always easy to keep my mouth shut and ears pinned back—but I believe in living and let live. They wouldn't listen to me anyway—even if I have been through the mill many times before

they were even getting sifted out. Experience is always the best teacher.

Living habits have changed so much that they wouldn't understand or believe the way we girls had to live 40 years ago.

It's a wise mother who knows and lives these beliefs of mine—before she has ever caused friction in any home.

There are so many wonderful things women can do—today—to keep busy and happy without trying to help others live their own lives or telling them how to run their own homes and children. (Mrs. C., New York)

### **I Side with My In-Laws**

Some mothers-in-law report that the secret of their success lies in siding with their children-in-law whenever a difference of opinion between the married children arises. This is the counterpart to the appreciation expressed by many sons- and daughters-in-law for their mother-in-law's partiality, as we saw in Chapter 6. Two mothers-in-law are selected to illustrate the practice from the elder woman's point of view.

One lonely mother-in-law in Pennsylvania grieves for her absent daughter-in-law who has returned to her people in the State of Washington after her divorce. The mother-in-law adores her with more warmth than she feels for her own son. The two women exchange gifts and long for the time when they can be reunited.

Another mother-in-law generalizes on her role when she says:

They [mothers-in-law] are even capable of taking the part of their son- or daughter-in-law against their own child, knowing very well that their own child will not only forgive them for doing it, often against their better knowledge, but love them all the more for doing so, while their "in-law" child would feel altogether different about that situation. (Mrs. H., New York)

In some situations not even a mother's love can keep her loyal to her own-child when the in-law is right. One family history reads like the second act of a bad play. The mother struggled through the years to raise a sickly son, saw him graduate from high school, and then sent him to college. While there he compromised a little home-town girl who was im-

pressed by the attention paid her by a college man. The two were married in haste without the knowledge of either set of parents. The mother forgave her son's indiscretion and financed the remainder of his education through to a master's degree. He taught for a year or so and for the first time he was able to support himself and wife and their children, now three in number, when along came the draft and he was shipped to a camp in the South. As soon as his basic training was over and he had occasional free time for himself, his wife felt it important to be as close to him as possible. She left the baby with her mother and packed off her two older children and herself to the drab little community near the base.

The stint in the Army was over, and the little family collected itself in a small town where the father resumed his teaching, and the mother made a home for her home-hungry family. Those were the happy times, his mother recalls. By supplementing his salary with a number of part-time jobs, her son was able to support his family nicely and even get them a TV set and a number of other "extras" that made life good.

At last the mother felt that the family was on its feet and could get along without her help, except for the summer vacations and the special trips and the substantial Christmas gifts that she was glad to shower upon them.

Then, her boy decided that he wasn't meant to be a teacher in a small town. He took a number of vocational lunges, into selling bonds, then television sets, then managing a motion picture business, until finally he wound up as administrative officer in a small denominational college. Now it was necessary for him to get training beyond a master's degree, so he went back to the university for one full year and several summers until he earned the right to use the title "Doctor" before his name.

His mother was something of a statistician herself by now, and so it was she who helped him get his doctor's dissertation in shape to present to his committee, and to rework it through one whole summer so that it could come up to standard. Of course, during these months he made his home with her, without compensation.



Then a peculiar thing happened. Once he had become "educated," he no longer was satisfied with his wife, and began an affair with a local teacher with a master's degree. His wife, loyal and loving, tried to overlook his behavior until one evening he suddenly faced her with a one-way ticket to Reno and an ultimatum to leave in the morning. Even then he feared his mother might stop the divorce. He threatened his wife that if she contacted his mother before the divorce was final, he would cut her and the children off without a cent. The wife submitted to his demands and threats and emerged six weeks later with her "freedom," and the children to support on the fifteen dollars a month their father had "settled for."

The man's "carrying on" with the educated spinster cost him his job. That, and his casting off of his wife and children without an adequate effort to come to terms with his own problems, so alienated his mother that she told him she would have nothing more to do with him until he came to his senses.

Instead, the mother took the cast-off wife and children under her wing. She helped the abandoned woman regain her self-confidence by financing her college education, sacrificed so long ago by the impetuosity of her wayward son. Today the mother-in-law's sympathies are entirely with her daughter-in-law, who looks to her as mother. Both of them share a conspiracy of silence about the man responsible for bringing them together.

Thus, because it sometimes seems expedient to side with in-law children, because some sons- and daughters-in-law are so genuinely lovable and beloved, and because in some cases the children-in-law are definitely "in the right" from the mother's point of view, mothers-in-law often are found to be partial to their in-law children.

### **Letting Children Go as They Marry**

The time in the family cycle when grown children are leaving home for work, for military service, and for homes of their own is a critical one in the life of many a mother. It is then

that she must revise the habits of a lifetime and let her children go their own way without any "entangling alliances" on her part.

Some mothers find these launching functions fairly easy; for they have been freeing their children all along the way. Even as little children they respect them as persons, and let them go and grow into whatever experiences come along. Now when work or marriage beckons their young away from their day-by-day association, it is only the inevitable next step in the long process of emancipation.

These mothers who effectively encourage their children's autonomy are rarely if ever the women who "live for their children." They are almost always persons in their own right, who have interesting lives of their own, and who do not require their children's attention and achievements to fill their aching voids. They are women like the one who said that it is probably much more important for children to be proud of the kind of people their parents are, than it is for parents to be proud of their children.

Even in the most favorable of situations, however, letting children go when they marry is not easy. As one mother puts it:

It is sudden, before you know it, the time in the far distant future, is right here, and you have to open your hand and let go. It is very easy to take possession, but very hard to let go a child that has been wholly yours, and suddenly—no ties—to be turned over to some boy or girl. (Mrs. J., Illinois)

Another mother details for us an episode out of her own launching time that gives us something of the different ways in which the period is interpreted by members of the two generations involved, and what it takes on the part of the mother-in-law-to-be to bridge the gap between her husband and his expectant son-in-law:

I have one daughter upon whom we showered the very best that we could afford in education, beauty, background and love. When a cocky young Californian flew into Randolph Field from two years in the North African Campaign and swept her off her feet and came

and told me that they were going to be married, I was scared. I did not approve war marriages, especially with strangers and girls under twenty. But I held my tongue and studied him for a few days, for he was around constantly. Meantime he did not mention their plans to my husband, who was home late and out early.

When I understood that he was indeed keenly intelligent and a good boy I had a long, frank talk with him. I told him that if he became my son-in-law that he would be in the position of making us either the happiest or the most unhappy parents because our daughter had never brought a shadow into our lives, and I asked him to go and talk to our pastor because our church was a close part of our lives. His response was right. They had visits together with our wise, loving pastor, yet he never talked to my husband. One day my husband called from the office for us to pick him up. I said, "Son, I think you should go after him because you need to have a good talk. Go up to his office."

He flared back, "I don't like this idea of asking for a girl. It is dated. She is eighteen. She knows what she wants to do."

I made a silent plea for wisdom then I said, "If it was our car you wanted, you would not dream of driving it away without consent, yet it represents less than one year's financial investment and no deep attachment. Our daughter has received all of our love and devotion for nineteen years; she is the heart of our home; our lives will be empty without her and we have invested every dollar we could in making her accomplished, capable and a good woman. We have no intention of attempting to withhold her from the man of her choice but doesn't it seem that her generous, loving father should be given some assurance that she will be in reasonable hands?"

"I haven't a thing but a little car and a few hundred dollars and I'm not going to involve myself in promises to support her as she's used to," he flared back.

I smiled because I knew he was embarrassed and told him to go on and that daddy might tell him how much he had to offer me when he was a veteran of foreign service. He was belligerent but he went. They came back relaxed and respectful of each other. I knew I had done right. I know that sometimes mothers have to make momentous decisions about their children's future but I think that if it is made with love and humility as well as with a determination to keep understanding and harmony in the family; if she does it with a prayer on her lips and in her heart, that she can find in return the love she longs for in the young people who want to come into her family.

Most young people are afraid. If they can be offered love they are reassured. Parents, also, are afraid to let their children launch into

their own lives. Young people should feel their responsibility to prove their worthiness. (Mrs. G., Texas)

### What Mothers-in-Law Feel Is Important

As we have seen, there are all sorts of personal formulas for being a good mother-in-law. Some women report that they succeed only through avoidance and distance. Others say that it requires courage and unlimited patience. Occasionally one finds a mother-in-law who recommends siding with her in-law children. Others refrain from taking either side in any difference of opinion between husband and wife. In general, it is suggested that the mother of grown children release them fully into adulthood as the best safeguard against the hazards of in-lawhood. To do this, mothers are encouraged to find fullness in their own lives so that they will not fall into the pitfall of clinging to their children for their own emotional needs. This procedure takes working on if it is to succeed, as a mother-in-law in Colorado describes in her own way:

I am a mother-in-law, twice, and I've tried first of all, to raise my two sons to be clean, decent, law-abiding men, with intelligence to make a good living. I also made up my mind to mentally free them to live their own lives, in other words, *to love them and leave them alone*. I also made up my mind to like my daughters-in-law, and treat them as friends. It really works. We live in cities seventy-five miles apart and frequent visits both ways are highly enjoyable. I think we actually like each other. And now that they, my sons, are married and away, I have a chance to live a most interesting life of my own, and they all think I'm simply wonderful because I do. There have been times when it took a lot of restraint and a lot of prayer not to interfere with my advice, but I kept still and they worked out their own problems.

Mothers-in-law can be pretty wonderful *if they work at it*. (Mrs. H., Colorado)

One woman suggests that the thing that makes many mothers fear becoming mothers-in-law is the difference in the relationship. Your own children love you willy-nilly, but you have to earn the affection and respect of your sons- and daughters-in-law. Your own children you have known all



their lives, and they you, so the old familiar ways that you both take for granted are expected and understood. Your in-law children more often than not come to you as strangers whose behavior you cannot predict, whose ways are sure to differ in some areas of life, and sometimes in many. You are thrust into an intimate relationship with someone, therefore, who is strange to you, and you to him or her. Some strain is inevitable.

### **Your Children Are Not Yours Alone**

One suggestion for preparing for mother-in-lawhood is to practice thinking of one's sons and daughters through the years as "hyphenated-children." As children develop loyalties to toys, to pets, to friends, parents can make a practice of including the beloved one in family thinking and plans. Then, when the choice of the very special one who is to be a life-mate is made, the mother has already developed the pattern of thinking of her child as having loyalties and ties beyond herself, and can accept the chosen one as a part of the family.

The process looks something like this. When Jane is a baby, her mother respects her love for her rag doll and thinks of her as Jane-and-dolly, letting Jane take the doll with her to bed, on trips, and wherever she wishes. When Jane discards the old dolly for the new Teddy bear, mother shifts her expectations and acceptance to think in terms of Jane-and-Teddy. When Jane goes to school and makes a "best friend," Suzy, mother learns to think now of Jane-and-Suzy. Later when Jane goes steady with Bill, mother accepts the Jane-and-Bill combine in family plans and understandings. So, sometime later, when John comes along, even before Jane has announced her intentions to marry him, her mother is thinking in terms of Jane-and-John as naturally as she did for all the "hyphenated others" who had been accepted as a part of Jane through the years.

The dynamics of this practice lies in the mother's recognition that she cannot expect her child's sole love and loyalty.

She understands from the very first that of course there will be "special people" in the life of her child with whom she cannot and should not compete. She respects the ability of her child to form bonds with others, and accepts these others as a part of her child by virtue of the child's choice of them. In the same way in which she wishes her children and her friends to recognize her ties in the mother-and-daddy loyalties that the children grow up with, so she recognizes those hyphenated others who are chosen by her child as an important part of him at the moment, to be respected and considered as significant just because they are the child's chosen ones.

### **Rewards of Being a Good Mother-in-Law**

The satisfactions of being adequate as a mother-in-law are many. There is the peace that comes from harmony in the family, seen and felt in thousands of little ways through the years. There is the mutual acceptance, the sense of truly belonging to others and knowing that they in turn are glad to belong in the same extended family too. There is the mutual respect and admiration that is released, once the dangers of jealousy, rivalry, and resentment are laid low. There is the freedom to be and to do, and to differ when occasion arises without the nagging fear that one will be rejected or repudiated as a person just because one differs. There is the sense of a job well done in one's motherhood, and an ability to turn into the later years without too many regrets over the past. It means finding life good through the years because they have been and continue to be suffused with the warmth of genuine affection.

Out of such a fullness of life comes this statement from Massachusetts:

When I married 45 years ago, I decided that I would do my best to be as good and nice a daughter-in-law as possible and it paid good dividends, since my mother-in-law was very nice to me. On the other hand, my own darling mother who had likewise entered the ranks of mothers-in-law became greatly enriched by the added

blessings in the devotion and respect she received from my husband.

As my three sons grew into manhood, I realized that some day they would probably be marrying and that I must begin to think about the prospects of being a good mother-in-law.

Now my two older sons are married, each to a darling girl and I love each of them dearly. They had the sorrow of losing their mothers before they were married, so I realize that I had a greater responsibility to them than being just a mother-in-law. And great has been my reward, for they are both wonderful to me.

All this brings to my mind an occasion when my own mother many years ago, received a birthday card on which was written an original verse which I have always remembered. It was as follows:

It really sounds formal, it fills me with awe,  
To say "Happy Birthday" dear mother-in-law.  
So instead of that title, I'll choose one better above  
And say "Happy Birthday" dear mother-in-love.  
(Mrs. A., Massachusetts)

### **As Mothers-in-Law See Themselves (Summary)**

This chapter summarizes the findings from two phases of original research. The first explores who is the most difficult in-law and what makes him or her difficult. In this phase, we find that mothers-in-law very rarely criticize their children-in-law. Some mothers-in-law complain that their children-in-law are indifferent and thoughtless, and others are concerned about the incompetency of the persons their children married. Jealousy, criticalness, interfering, uncongeniality, and talkativeness are mentioned, but rarely, as things children-in-law do that make relationships in the family difficult. In general, the findings are that mothers-in-law are patient with their children-in-law, and criticize them only rarely.

The second phase of the current investigation is of the content analysis of replies to a national contest about mothers-in-law. A surprisingly large number of women responded as mothers-in-law eager to discuss their mother-in-law roles.

Mothers-in-law have a great deal to say about how it feels to be a mother-in-law. They say that a mother-in-law is "behind the eight ball" in many instances—that she can't win, no

matter what she does. Some mothers-in-law feel that their sons- and daughters-in-law don't like them, and so feel estranged and cut-off from their own married children. Mothers-in-law have mixed feelings about doing for their married children. Some feel imposed upon. Most wish they were taken less for granted, and appreciated as persons. Some mothers-in-law accept the avoidance stereotype literally and feel that the only way to get along as a mother-in-law is to mind one's own business and keep one's distance from in-laws. There are mothers-in-law who side with their children-in-law because they prefer them, or because they feel it is the expedient way to handle situations, or because they feel that their own-children are in the wrong and the in-laws are right.

The problem of launching children into marriage tends to be difficult because it is hard for the mother to let her children go into lives of their own. Getting into training early in the life of the child by encouraging the child to be himself and to grow and go beyond his mother is recommended. Mothers who are most adequate in letting children go are growing persons themselves. Seeing children as always having hyphenated-others who are "special people" is good preparation for the acceptance of children-in-law as literally a part of one's hyphenated children. There are rewards for being a good mother-in-law that are worth working for—and becoming an adequate mother-in-law does take work.

The findings of this part of the pilot study, as well as the several hypotheses raised to interpret the trends in the data, should be challenged with further investigations designed to cut into these areas with sharper tools and more penetrating instruments.



## Mother-in-Law Is the Most Difficult

**M**OTHER-IN-LAW heads the list of difficult in-laws by a wide margin. Of the 992 having in-law difficulties of any kind (the total of 1,337 minus 345 having "no problems"), one out of every two (49.5%; 491) mentions mother-in-law as most difficult.

More than one-third of the total 1,337 men and women, 491 (36.8%) named mother-in-law their most difficult in-law. These mother-in-law mentions were not evenly distributed among the groups. Individual groups mentioning mother-in-law as most troublesome ranged from 11.9% to 76.5%.

Nine out of ten complaints about mothers-in-law came from women (1,227 specific complaints; 89.6%); while men list only 142 (10.4%) specific complaints against their mothers-in-law out of a total of 1,369 from the entire group. (Table 12) These data do not support the popular notion that it is the man who professes the greater difficulty with his mother-in-law. These data show that it is the woman who feels the mother-in-law problem more often. In this respect our findings corroborate Paul Wallin's<sup>1</sup> report that among those couples in the Burgess-Wallin sample, more wives (17.1%) than husbands (8.3%) dislike their mothers-in-law.

In general, younger women mentioned mother-in-law most difficult significantly more frequently than did older women.

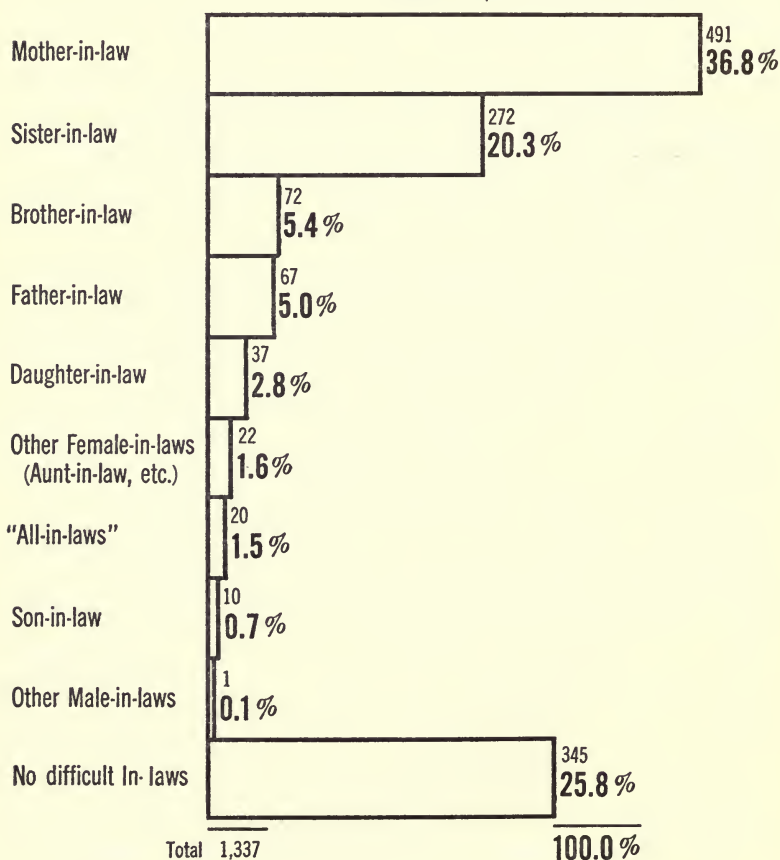
The South, where familism remains most deeply in-

TABLE 11

The In-law named  
most difficult  
by 1,337 persons



Number and per cent of times mentioned



trenched,<sup>2</sup> has the fewest mentions of mother-in-law as most difficult (25.7%). This compares with 43.4% mother-in-law most difficult mentions in the North East; 39.2% for the North Central Region; and 37.1% for the West.

Differences between the groups of various religious affiliations are significant and beg for interpretation and follow-up study. The three groups that roughly paralleled each other in social characteristics except for their religious connections and auspices point up these differences: Jewish—76.5%, Baptist—25.0% and Roman Catholic—11.9%. Thus, we see that the Jewish group had three times the percentage of mother-in-law most difficult mentions found in the Baptist group; while the Protestant group had more than twice the percentage of mother-in-law most difficult mentions found in the Roman Catholic group. These differences are all significant and cannot have occurred by chance.

It has been suggested <sup>3</sup> that the liberal Jewish group is going through a cultural transformation from an ultraconservative to a more liberal, equalitarian family and personal life. This means that they are exploring extensive role changes involving one perception of mother-in-law roles on the part of the older generation, and another on the part of their daughters-in-law. These differences in conceptions of role are quite probably conflictful in many cases, and may account for the strikingly high percentage of young Jewish women who name their mothers-in-law as their most difficult in-law.

Conversely, the Roman Catholic group has the smallest percentage of mentions of mother-in-law as most difficult. One interpretation of this tendency may be that the Roman Catholic is more reticent than are either Protestants or Jews in reporting conflict within the family. There is, too, among Roman Catholics a strong tendency toward the sacredness of motherhood. Or, it may be that the persistence of strong traditions for family harmony among this group actually make for fewer intergenerational conflicts than among the other groups where families have been under such marked change in recent years.

Thus we see that those who mention mother-in-law as their most difficult in-law tend to be Jewish more often than Christian, non-Catholic more often than Roman Catholic, women more often than men, younger more frequently than older married women, and northern and western regions of the United States more often than the South. Conversely, mother-in-law is least often mentioned as being difficult by Roman Catholics, men in general, women old enough to be mothers-in-law themselves, and those of both sexes who live in the South.

Two interpretations of these tendencies may be advanced as hypotheses for further research: (1) Mother-in-law is least often criticized in settings where there is a strong culturally defined repression of intrafamily conflicts; and (2) mother-in-law is especially a problem in subcultures where rapid changes in personal and family living are taking place.

Having taken a look at the differences between the various groups in the frequency with which they mention mother-in-law as most difficult, let us return to the main point. In 16 of the 17 groups, mother-in-law was mentioned as the most difficult. Only one group (Roman Catholic) named an in-law other than mother-in-law more often as most difficult. The overwhelming majority of all groups and of all individuals interviewed named their mothers-in-law as most difficult.

Mother-in-law is mentioned as the most difficult in-law in significantly larger numbers than is any other relative by marriage. These differences are significant at the one per cent level, and so are not likely to have occurred by chance. There is no question, then, that the mother-in-law is considered the most difficult in-law.

This general tendency is in line with the American culture. It may, in fact, reflect it. It is quite possible that, given an opportunity to react negatively to their relatives by marriage—as the people in this phase of the study were—most persons will name the mother-in-law as most difficult because it is she in our society who may be criticized without censure, in fact, even with a certain expectation. These group sanctioned ide-



**TABLE 12**

**MOTHER-IN-LAW DIFFICULTIES REPORTED BY 491 PERSONS**

<i>What Mother-in-Law Does That Makes Her Most Difficult In-Law</i>	<i>Specific Criticism Named Number Per Cent</i>	
1. Meddles, interferes, dominates, intrudes on our privacy, etc.	383	28.0
2. Is possessive, demanding, overprotective, forces attention, etc.	193	14.1
3. Nags, criticizes, complains, finds fault, ridicules, etc.	150	10.9
4. Ignores us, is indifferent, uninterested, not helpful, aloof, does not accept me/us, not close, unsociable, etc.	99	7.2
5. Clings, is irresponsible, immature, childish, dependent, has no life of her own, no interests beyond us, undependable, etc.	93	6.8
6. Disagrees on traditions, has different standards, is old-fashioned, resists change, is intolerant of our ways, has nothing in common with us	84	6.2
7. Is thoughtless, inconsiderate, selfish, unappreciative, etc.	76	5.6
8. Takes sides, plays favorites, shows partiality, spoils and pampers my husband, plays one family against the other, etc.	72	5.3
9. Abuses hospitality, comes without invitation, overstays visits, lives with us more than necessary, does not reciprocate, etc.	58	4.2
10. Is self-righteous, superior, always right, egotistical, smug, boastful, lords it over me/us, brags, knows all the answers	41	3.0
11. Talks too much, asks useless questions, doesn't listen, is full of idle chatter, gushes, doesn't try to understand	39	2.8
12. Tattles, gossips, misrepresents facts, exaggerates, lies, is dishonest, insincere, deceitful, etc.	34	2.5
13. Is jealous, rivalrous, envious, covets what we have, etc.	33	2.4
14. Does not do own job well, is not a good mother, neglects her family, is extravagant, doesn't take care of her home, etc.	12	0.9
15. Drinks, gambles	2	0.1
Total	1,369	100.0

ologies, gathered by the method employed in the group interviewing, may be expected to reflect those experiences that are in line with the mores and expected responses of the culture.

However, the freedom of Americans to criticize their mothers-in-law is not the only reason for the high percentage of votes she gets for being the most difficult in-law. There are apparently elements within the mother-in-law relationship that make it especially troublesome. It is evident from the family documents available from hundreds of persons that there is some basis for the sentiment within personal experience with mother-in-law.

When given a chance to indicate what it is that the mother-in-law does or does not do that makes her so difficult, men and women have no trouble detailing their criticisms. The 491 men and women who named the mother-in-law as the most difficult in-law, mentioned 1,369 specific things she does that make for trouble.

### **Meddling Mothers-in-Law**

Of all complaints, the one significantly larger than any other is that the mother-in-law meddles, interferes, and intrudes on privacy.

Not only is the meddlesomeness of the mother-in-law the most frequently mentioned criticism of all those leveled at her, but it is mentioned as a mother-in-law complaint significantly more frequently than of any other in-law, as is seen in Table 13.

This rank order of the in-laws mentioned as being meddlesome and interfering is striking evidence that it is the mother-in-law who is the worst offender. Practically two-thirds (65.1%) of all the times that meddlesomeness is mentioned as a problem with in-laws, it is in connection with the mother-in-law. Were it not for mothers-in-law and sisters-in-law, meddlesomeness would not be a problem of any great frequency; for, 87.2% of all mentions of "meddles, interferes, etc." are those illustrating difficulties with either the mother-in-law or the sister-in-law.

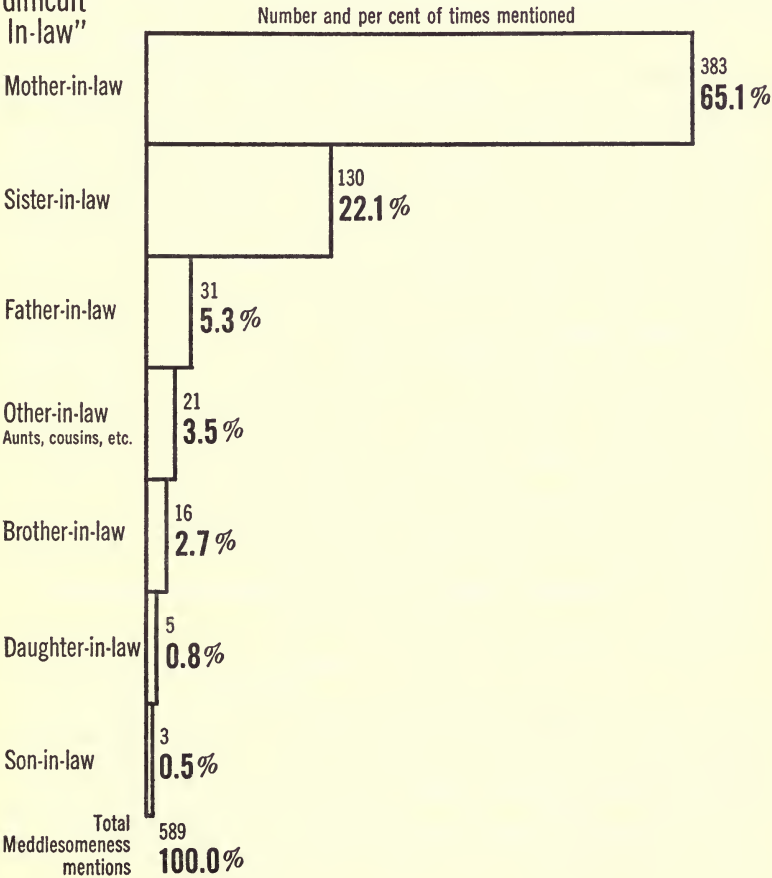
TABLE 13

Meddlesomeness mentioned  
as specific complaint:  
by In-laws



"He/She meddles, interferes, etc."

"Most  
difficult  
In-law"



Members of the younger generation are quite infrequently mentioned as being meddlesome and interfering. Only 0.8% of these criticisms are leveled against daughters-in-law, and 0.5% attributed to sons-in-law, a total of but 1.3% in both.

It is clear that it is the relatives by marriage standing in positions of authority who are most likely to indulge in interference and meddling, according to their in-laws. Thus, it is mothers-in-law, sisters-in-law, and fathers-in-law who are the most frequent offenders, while the younger generation is hardly ever mentioned as troublesome in this way.

### **Possessive Mothers-in-Law**

A large percentage of the criticism of being "demanding, possessive, overprotective, etc." is attributed to mother-in-law. More than three out of four of the mentions of this criticism are in reference to the mother-in-law (76.6%). Again the sister-in-law ranks second as offender, but even she trails significantly behind mother-in-law in the percentage of times her name is linked with the criticism (13.1%).

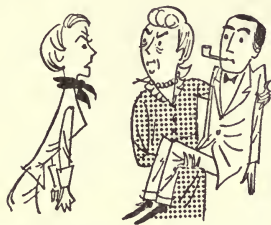
It is interesting that in both the criticism of meddlesomeness and that of possessiveness (Tables 13 and 14) the rank order of the various relatives by marriage is strikingly similar, with mother-in-law, sister-in-law, and father-in-law in first, second, and third rank positions in each characteristic. Again for this trait, as for meddlesomeness also, the son-in-law and the daughter-in-law trail with the fewest number of mentions. Except for the reversal of brother-in-law and other-in-law in the two rank orders, the sequence is the same for both characteristics.

### **Nagging Mothers-in-Law**

More than one-half of all the mentions of "nags, criticizes, complains, etc." refer to mother-in-law (54.3%). As in the criticisms of meddlesomeness and possessiveness, the sister-in-law ranks second to the mother-in-law in the percentage of times the complaint is mentioned. And again the father-in-law



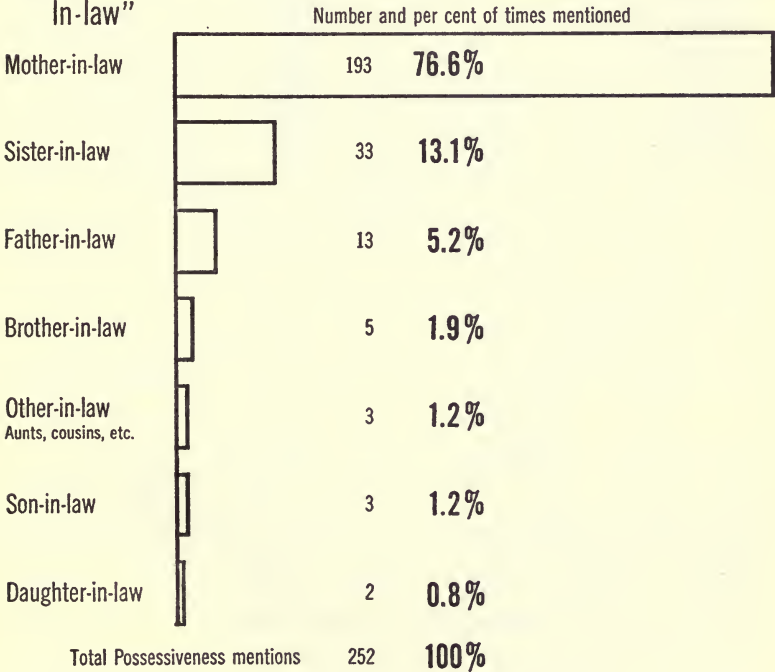
TABLE 14



“Most difficult  
In-law”

Possessiveness mentioned  
as specific complaint:  
by In-laws

*“He/She is possessive, demanding, etc.”*



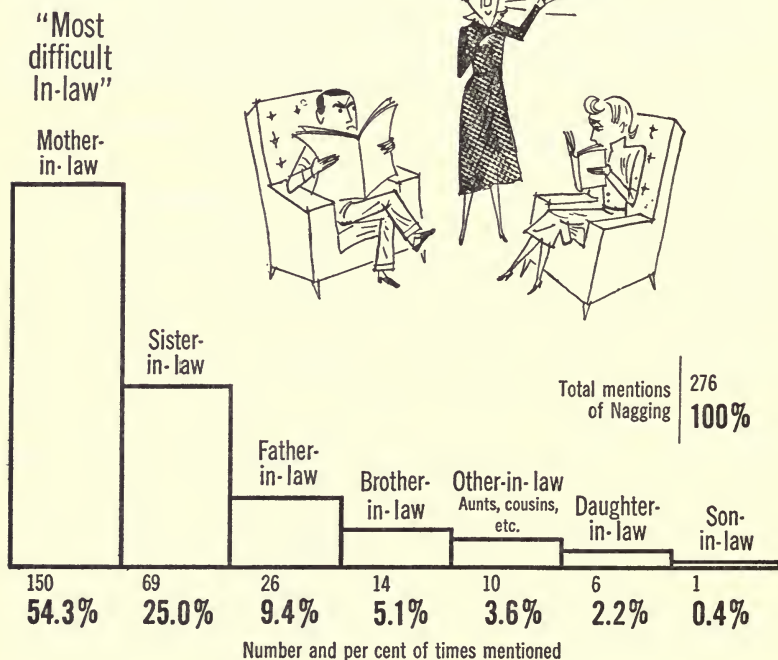
ranks third in the number of times this particular characteristic is attributed to him.

There is a significant difference at better than the one per cent level between the percentage of times the criticism of nagging is mentioned in connection with the mother-in-law and the percentage of times for the sister-in-law.

TABLE 15

# Nagging mentioned as specific complaint: by In-laws

*"He/ She nags, criticizes, complains, etc."*



As in the characteristics previously analyzed, it is clear that the criticism of nagging and complaining is not one often applied to the son-in-law or the daughter-in-law. The combined mentions of the complaint total less than 3% (2.6%) for both the children-in-law.

We have, then, practically the same rank order of the criticisms most often mentioned in connection with the mother-

in-law: meddlesomeness, possessiveness, and nagging. In each of these the mother-in-law is mentioned more often than any other in-law. In each, the sister-in-law ranks second and the father ranks third in the number of mentions of the criticism. In each, the children-in-law have the least number of mentions of the specific characteristic.

### **The Mother-in-Law Syndrome \***

Meddlesomeness-possessiveness-nagging is the mother-in-law syndrome. In each of these characteristics the number of times attributed to the mother-in-law is significantly (at the one per cent level or better) higher than to any other in-law. Together these three things that the mother-in-law does that make her difficult account for more than one-half (53.0%) of all criticisms leveled against her. Furthermore, as we have seen above, those in-laws who rank second and third after the mother-in-law are those who are most closely identified with her: her husband and her daughter. These two in-laws will be seen more in detail in later chapters. For now it is important to see just what men and women say makes the mother-in-law in our culture as troublesome as she seems to be.

The tabulations above are for the specific criticisms men and women have of their mothers-in-law. The 1,369 criticisms about mother-in-law that came from 491 persons were categorized, using the original wording, and then counted for the numbers and percentages found in the tables. As we have seen, certain criticisms are found to be significantly more frequent than others. More than one-half of all complaints about mothers-in-law are found in the three categories: (1) Meddles, interferes, dominates, intrudes on our privacy; (2) Is possessive, demanding, overprotective, forces attention; and (3) Nags, criticizes, complains, finds fault, ridicules, etc.

Some of the personal reports of difficulties with mothers-in-law are clear illustrations of the mother-in-law syndrome

\* Syndrome is the medical term for a series of symptoms forming together a clinical picture of a disease.

in two or more of the three categories that form it. Twelve of these verbatim statements are listed in Table 16, along with the sex and age of the person reporting them. Going back to the original sources in this way gives something of the spirit as well as the content of the constellation of characteristics most often found difficult in the mother-in-law.

TABLE 16

## HOW MEN AND WOMEN EXPRESS THE MOTHER-IN-LAW SYNDROME

<i>What Mother-in-Law Does That Makes Her Difficult</i>	<i>Sex and Age of Person Reporting</i>	
"She tries to rule our household She tries to make us financially dependent She is demanding of our time and attention"	Male	32
"She dominates us She gives her daughter more expensive gifts than her husband can afford"	Male	24
"I wish she were able to let go of her child I wish she would criticize couple's decisions less She interferes too much in young family"	Female	29
"We wish she would treat us like adults rather than ordering us like children We wish she wouldn't tell me how to rear our child, granting her children have turned out O.K. She nags at us so much"	Female	25
"She doesn't like the way I cook or keep house She nags about our financial management She is demanding of her son"	Female	24
"She tried to run our lives She should wait until asked before trying to solve any of our problems"	Male	44
"Mind her own finances and let ours alone Let us raise our own children Let us settle our own arguments"	Female	36
"Prefer she would not expect a letter once a week Wish she wouldn't worry about us constantly Prefer she would not keep telling us how lonesome she is without us"	Female	30



TABLE 16 (Continued)

## HOW MEN AND WOMEN EXPRESS THE MOTHER-IN-LAW SYNDROME

<i>What Mother-in-Law Does That Makes Her Difficult</i>	<i>Sex and Age of Person Reporting</i>	
"She criticized our choice of furniture, our house-keeping, the names of our children, the Eastern Star and church school activities. In fact the last 2 years after my mother-in-law died have been the only happy ones in 22 years"	Female	45
"She corrects child in conflict with my discipline She makes decisions involving my participation without my knowledge She tried to get my husband to do things he hates"	Female	43
"She interferes in family affairs She tries to manage the children She expects more attention from husband and wife than they can comfortably give"	Female	55
"Wish she would realize her child is an adult She should be more willing to have family conferences rather than be the 'boss' She <i>demand</i> s affection from children"	Male	57

The mother-in-law syndrome is characterized by the mother-in-law's too-close and too-frequent intrusion into the life of her married children. Both sons- and daughters-in-law dislike her insistence upon too closely relating herself to them in ways that curtail their independence and delay their maturity.

In a sense, all three of the top-ranking categories of criticisms of mother-in-law are complaints that the mother-in-law acts as though her married children and their mates were still her children to be criticized and disciplined and protected as children.

This type of mother finds difficulty in letting her children go and grow. She tries to continue to be the authority figure in their lives, even after they have homes of their own. These efforts to hold her children close to her are resented not only by her own children, but especially by her sons- and daughters-in-law.

### The Complaint of Distance

The fourth ranking criticism of mother-in-law is at the other pole of the relationship. Out of 1,369 things that mother-in-law does that make her difficult, 99 (7.2%) are in the category, "She ignores us, is indifferent, uninterested, not helpful, aloof, does not accept me/us, not close, unsociable, not motherly, etc." This is a complaint of distance that the mother-in-law maintains between herself and her married children.

Although this complaint represents but 7.2% of those attributed to mother-in-law, some 42.7% of the mentions of this characteristic are in connection with the mother-in-law, as seen in Table 17.

Mother-in-law heads the list of in-laws who are said to be difficult because of their indifference and lack of interest in their relatives. Sister-in-law ranks second in this characteristic with 31.0%, a difference not significantly different from that attributed to the mother-in-law.

Those who say that they find mother-in-law difficult because she does not pay enough attention to them, does not seem to accept them as members of the family, and does not seem motherly, are speaking of the absence of the quality that so many sons- and daughters-in-law appreciate, as seen in Chapter 6.

These are the criticisms that are diametrically opposite to the ones in the three top-ranking categories that compose the mother-in-law syndrome of being too close and too possessive. It seems that mother-in-law must steer a careful course in the narrow channel between the Scylla of meddlesomeness on the one hand and the Charybdis of indifference on the other in order to please her children by marriage. Mothers-in-law themselves are quite articulate about this, as we saw in Chapter 9.

The mother-in-law's dilemma is similar to that of the porcupine who can relate himself to his own kind only by being *very careful*. Too close and the quills hurt. Too far away and there is no contact.

TABLE 17

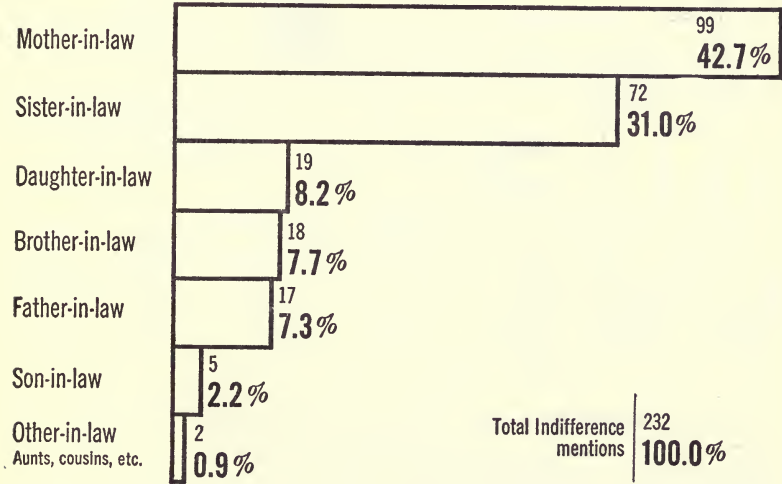
Indifference mentioned as specific complaint:  
by In-laws



"He/She is indifferent,  
uninterested, etc."

"Most difficult  
In-law"

Number and  
per cent of  
times mentioned



Immature Mothers-in-Law

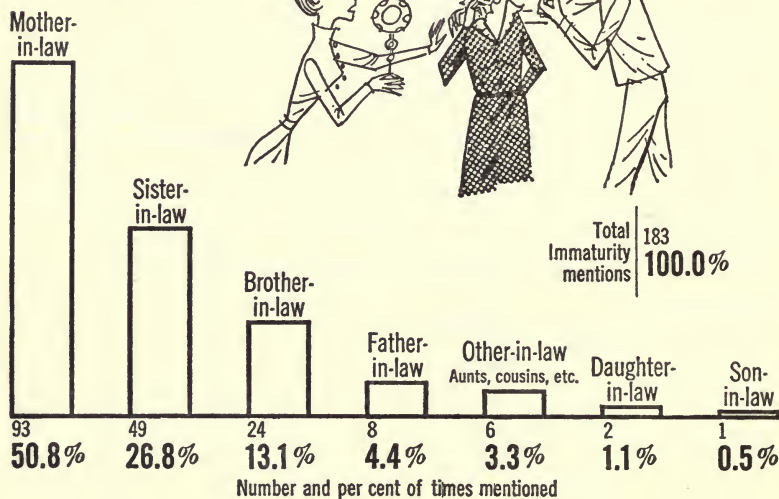
Of the 1,369 criticisms of mother-in-law, 93 (6.8%) are that she "Clings, is irresponsible, immature, childish, dependent, has no life of her own, no interests beyond us, undependable, etc." Children-in-law find the clinging mother-in-law a burden, and wish that she would make a life for herself instead of being so dependent upon them.

TABLE 18

# Immaturity mentioned as specific complaint: by In-laws

*"He/She is immature, childish, dependent, etc."*

**"Most difficult In-law"**



It is interesting that son-in-law and daughter-in-law are rarely mentioned as being immature, with 0.5% and 1.1% respectively, totaling less than 2% of all the mentions of immaturity. Father-in-law accounts for less than 5% of the immaturity mentions. Sister-in-law and brother-in-law rank second and third after mother-in-law's first place in the number of mentions of immaturity, but they are significantly less often mentioned as being immature than is the mother-in-law. Mother-in-law's percentage of immaturity mentions is significantly greater than any other in-law at the one per cent level.

One-half of all the mentions of immaturity are in connec-



tion with mother-in-law (50.8%). Childishness is mentioned significantly more often as a mother-in-law trait than for any other in-law. This may be related to the inability of the mother-in-law to let her children go into a life of their own, so that she follows them as a clinging dependent after they have married and made a life for themselves. It may be a hazard of this generation of women who have not been encouraged to live beyond their children, and so are plunged into a role devoid of interests when the children marry.

### **Old-Fashioned Mothers-in-Law**

The sixth category of criticisms of relatives by marriage is that they are not congenial. Included in this classification are the specific complaints: "Disagrees on traditions, has different standards, is old-fashioned, resists change, is intolerant of our ways, has nothing in common with us."

The 163 mentions of uncongeniality were not evenly distributed between the various relatives by marriage, although each received one or more mentions of this sort. Again the mother-in-law leads all other in-laws in this complaint, with 51.5% of all mentions of it. Sister-in-law ranks second with 22.1%, and father-in-law with 12.9% of all mentions of being uncongenial, etc. Table 19 ranks the in-laws by the percentage of uncongeniality mentions each received.

Mother-in-law has a higher percentage of uncongeniality mentions than any other relative by marriage. The number of times uncongeniality is attributed to her is significant at the one per cent level in frequency over that of the sister-in-law, who ranks second.

More than one-half of all the criticisms of being uncongenial, intolerant of difference, resistant to change, etc., are connected with the mother-in-law. As these complaints are viewed as a constellation, they seem to describe the mother-in-law who has failed to keep up with her children as they have grown, and who resists change to the point where there



is no longer much in common between her and her married children.

The dynamics of this characteristic of a mother-in-law who is found difficult is similar to the immaturity factor, except in this instance: the mother-in-law remains stolidly in her old ways and refuses to change. She has a life of her own, as the dependent mother-in-law of the immaturity category does not, but her ways are no longer the ways of her married children and so she remains behind and is labeled "old-fashioned" by her children-in-law.

### **Thoughtless Mothers-in-Law**

Women are sometimes considered thoughtless by their sons-and daughters-in-law. Out of the 1,369 specific criticisms of mothers-in-law, 76 (5.6%) say that she is "Thoughtless, inconsiderate, selfish, unappreciative, etc."

This is mentioned as a trait of other relatives by marriage too, but not as frequently as it is attributed to mother-in-law. Of 206 mentions of thoughtlessness, 76 (36.8%) are in connection with mother-in-law. Sister-in-law is a close second, with 34.9%. Brother-in-law ranks third in the mentions of this trait, with 11.3% of the total, significantly less than mother-in-law's percentage at the one per cent level.

With the exception of sister-in-law, mother-in-law receives a higher percentage of mentions of being thoughtless than any other in-law. These differences are significant at the one per cent level. Like the criticism of being indifferent and uninterested, this complaint says in effect that mother-in-law does not stand up well in a close relationship. She is said to be unappreciative of things done for her. She is criticized as being inconsiderate and selfish in ways similar to the charges brought against her in the immaturity category of mentions.

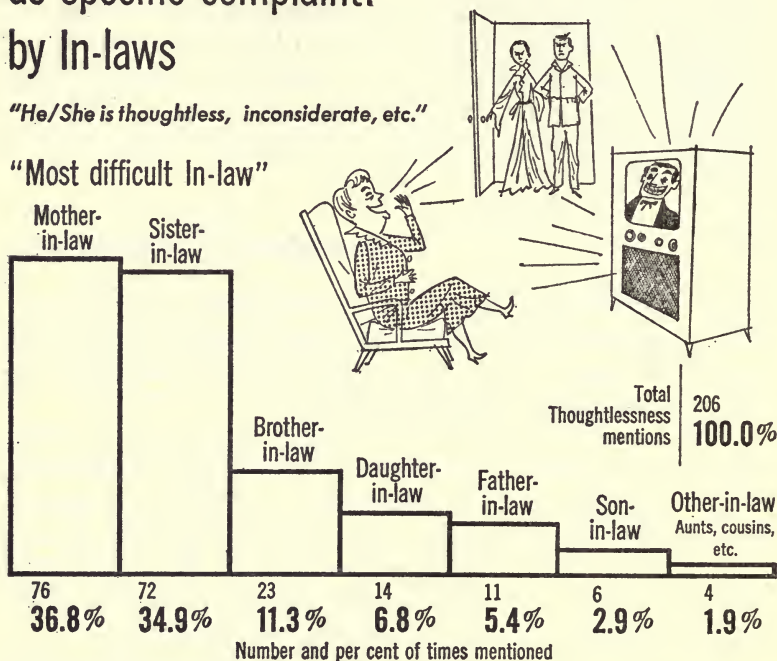
Although this complaint accounts for less than 6% (5.6%) of all criticisms of mother-in-law, the fact that it looms larger for her than for any other relative by marriage except the sister-in-law makes it of interest.

TABLE 20

# Thoughtlessness mentioned as specific complaint: by In-laws

*"He/She is thoughtless, inconsiderate, etc."*

*"Most difficult In-law"*



## Pampering Mothers-in-Law

Men and women naming the things they find most difficult in their relatives by marriage say about their mothers-in-law: "She takes sides, plays favorites, shows partiality, spoils and pampers my husband, plays one family against the other, etc." These comments are seen as a constellation of pampering, analyzed in this section.

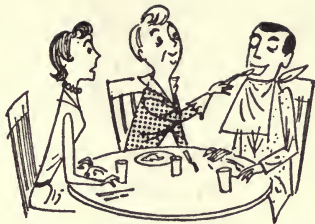
Spoiling and pampering is a complaint more frequently lodged against mothers-in-law than any other relative by marriage. Although this criticism accounts for but 5.3% of the total mentioned for mothers-in-law, she ranks first in the num-



TABLE 21

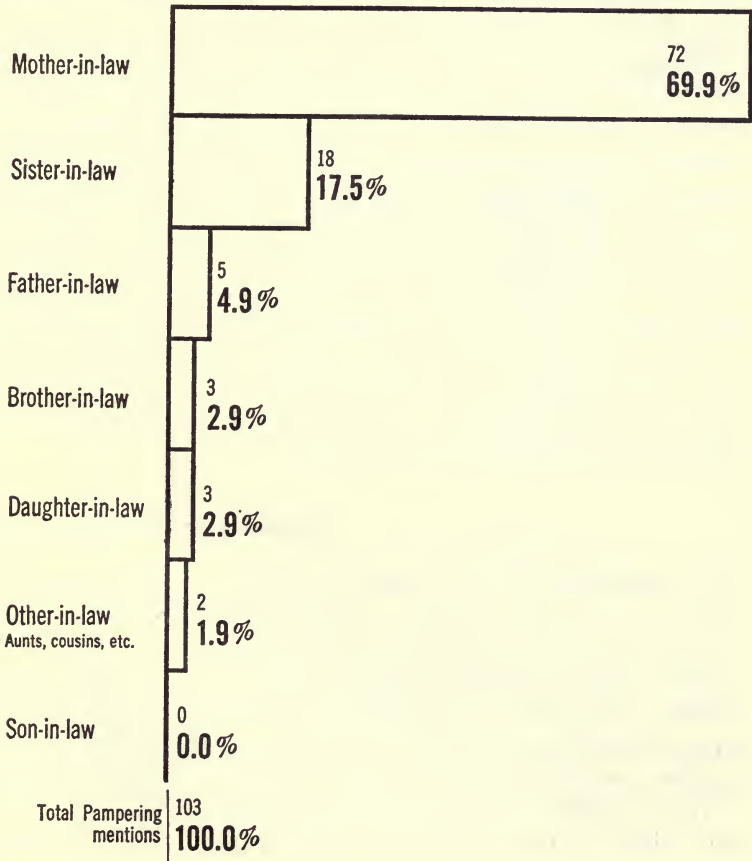
Pampering mentioned  
as specific complaint:  
by In-laws

*"He/She takes sides,  
spoils, pampers, etc."*



"Most difficult In-law"

Number and per cent of times mentioned



ber and percentage of times (72 mentions; 69.9%) she is named the most difficult because of this complaint. Table 21 shows the rank order of in-laws mentioned as pampering.

Sister-in-law ranks second in the number and percentage of pampering mentions, but this criticism is leveled at her significantly less often than at the mother-in-law (at the one per cent level). All other relatives by marriage account for less than 14% of the criticisms of this nature, significantly less often than those attributed to the mother-in-law. The son-in-law is mentioned not at all as offending with this characteristic, while the daughter-in-law and the brother-in-law get only three mentions each.

Pampering may be seen to be a part of the mother-in-law syndrome. It seems to be closely related to the possessiveness and the overprotectiveness that constitutes one facet of the characteristics most frequently mentioned as making mother-in-law difficult, as seen earlier in this chapter. Mother-in-law apparently pampers and spoils her married children when she has found it difficult to let them go as her children. This partiality to her own-children is resented by her children-in-law. From the case histories it seems evident that when mother-in-law takes sides with her own children, her children-in-law do not feel that they are accepted fully. The factor of acceptance, as we have already seen in previous chapters, is closely related to harmony between in-laws.

### **Intruding Mothers-in-Law**

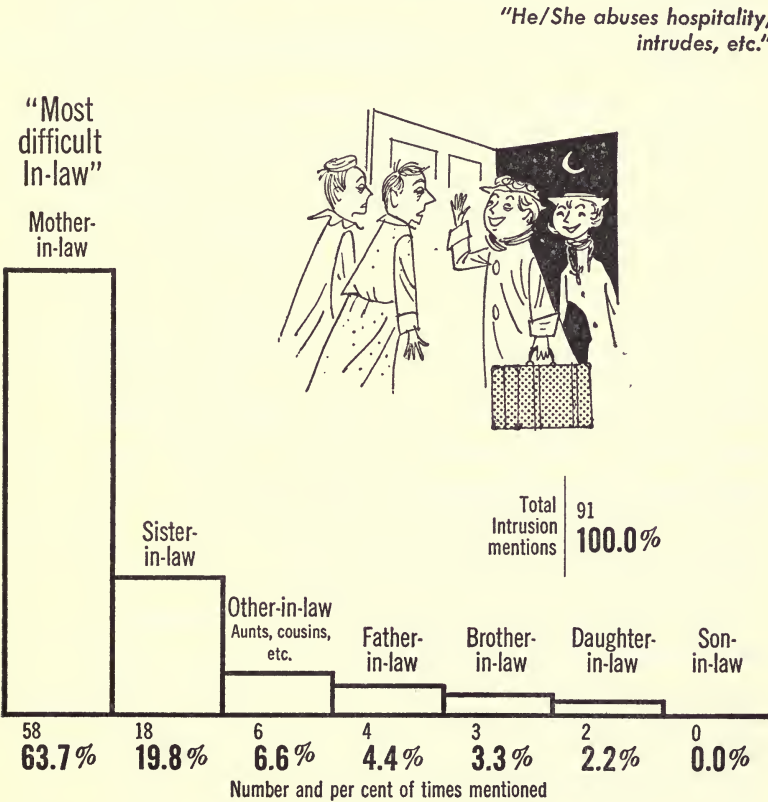
The mother-in-law who comes too often and stays too long has been the basis of many a mother-in-law joke. She is described as coming without invitation, living with her married children more than is really necessary, overstaying visits, abusing hospitality by demanding courtesies and expecting more time and attention than her hosts and hostesses find convenient, not reciprocating in favors and hospitality, and so on.

Mother-in-law is mentioned as intruding more often than is any other in-law. Almost two-thirds (63.7%) of all men-

tions of intrusions are in connection with mother-in-law. This is significantly more frequent than any other relative by marriage. Sister-in-law comes second with 19.8%, and the others-in-law trail behind her in the frequency with which this criticism is attributed to them. The rank order of intrusion mentions is found in the following table.

TABLE 22

Intrusion mentioned as specific complaint:  
by In-laws



Coming without invitation may be seen as related to the mother-in-law syndrome, in which the mother-in-law continues to think of her married offspring as her children and does not respect their privacy and autonomy as married adults. This tendency to take advantage of the hospitality of married children is closely related to the other complaints of the mother-in-law as intruding on privacy, demanding attention, and other elements of the mother-in-law syndrome. It may be responsible in part for the avoidance stereotype that would push mother-in-law off far enough so that she can not offend in this way.

### **Self-Righteous Mothers-in-Law**

A number of things that men and women list as making in-law relationships difficult have to do with the tendency of the person to be "Self-righteous, superior, always right, egotistical, smug, boastful, lords it over us, brags, and knows all the answers." This criticism accounts for 3.0% of all those attributed to mother-in-law.

Mother-in-law ranks first in the number and percentage of times that she is mentioned in connection with the complaint. Sister-in-law is a close second (34.5%). Brother-in-law and father-in-law rank third and fourth, with 15.1% and 11.5% respectively. Mother-in-law receives a significantly larger percentage of mentions of self-righteousness than does father-in-law. Differences between mother-in-law and siblings-in-law are insignificant and may be due to chance or to the size of the sample.

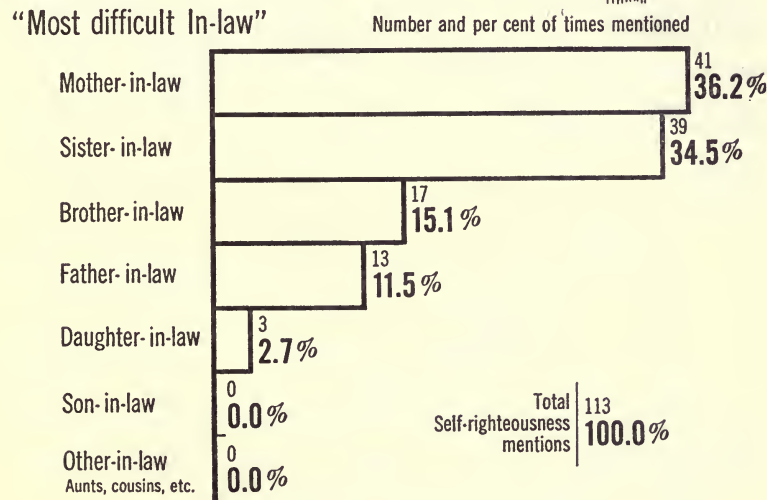
The criticism that mother-in-law is self-righteous and "lords it over us," seems to be one further part of the mother-in-law syndrome. It is related closely to the high-ranking complaint that mother-in-law criticizes, finds fault, etc., which is based upon her tendency to think of herself as right and her married children as culpable.



TABLE 23

Self-righteousness mentioned  
as specific complaint:  
by In-laws

*"He/She is self-righteous,  
superior, etc."*



Talkative Mothers-in-Law

Mother-in-law humor abounds in reference to her tendency to talk too much (see Chapter 2). Less than 3% (2.8%) of the men and women who participated in the group interview phase of this study mentioned talkativeness, however, as one of the things that makes mother-in-law difficult.

The number of times talkativeness is mentioned as a mother-in-law criticism is larger than for any other relative by marriage (44.8%). Sister-in-law is the second-ranking offender with 32.2%, not significantly less than mother-in-law. Father-

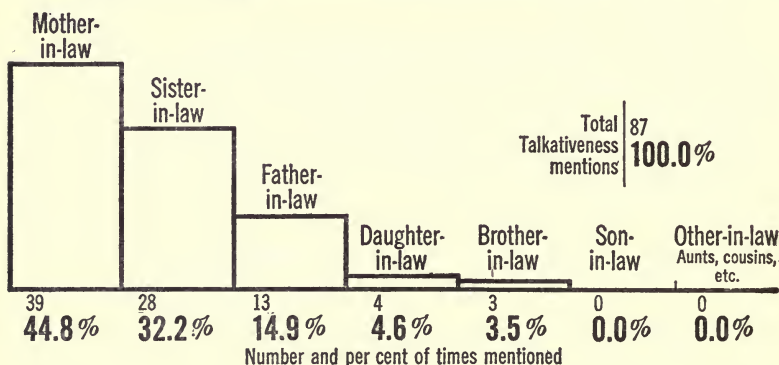
in-law comes third with 14.9%, significant at the 5% level. Children-in-law are rarely criticized as being talkative, as is seen in the table below.

TABLE 24

## Talkativeness mentioned as specific complaint: by In-laws

*"He/She talks too much, gushes, etc."*

**"Most difficult In-law"**



This tendency for men and women to criticize their mothers-in-law for being talkative may be a reflection of the mother-in-law stereotype. That is, some men and women may respond to the question, "Who is the most difficult in-law?" with the traditional forms of hostility-humor directed to the mother-in-law in our culture. We have already noted the frequency of this tendency to mouth the mythology, heard in the individual interviews (Chapter 2).

Another interpretation is that complaints of the mother-in-law's talkativeness reflect active rejection of her. The tendency to be annoyed by the "chatter" of one that is disliked

and rejected is well known. This, therefore, may be not only a reflection of one of the weaknesses of mothers-in-law; it may indicate further the tendency of men and women to find it difficult to accept their mothers-in-law, and to use the stereotyped hostility-humor as a vehicle for their rejection.

Gossiping Mothers-in-Law

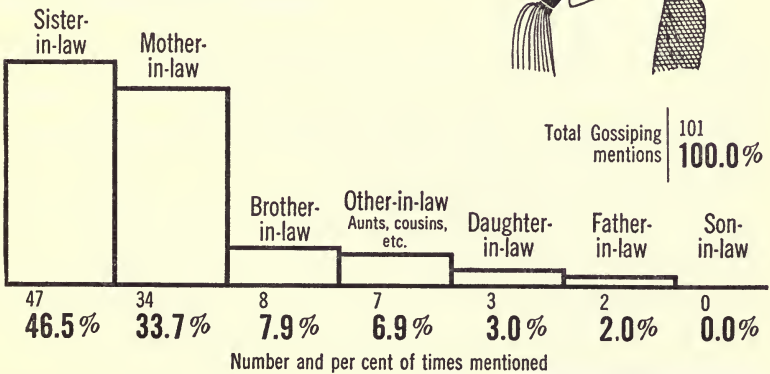
It isn't just that she talks all the time, it's what (and whom) she talks about that makes mother-in-law difficult, according to some. Men and women complain that their mothers-in-law "Tattle, gossip, misrepresent facts, exaggerate, lie, and are dishonest, insincere, deceitful, etc." These complaints represent 2.5% of all those leveled at mother-in-law. In all there are 101 mentions of this criticism, 34 of which (33.7%) are

TABLE 25

Gossiping mentioned as specific complaint: by In-laws

"He/She gossips, tattles, lies, etc."

"Most difficult In-law"



attributed to mother-in-law. Sister-in-law is even a greater offender, with 46.5% of the mentions of gossiping being laid to her door. This is not significantly greater than the mother-in-law frequency. Other relatives by marriage are criticized as being gossips somewhat less frequently than either the mother-in-law or the sister-in-law.

Mother-in-law ranks second in mentions of gossiping, tattling, and so on. Sister-in-law and brother-in-law rank higher in this complaint than in others analyzed to this point. Others-in-law, the group consisting of aunts-in-law, cousins-in-law, nieces-in-law, etc., rank fourth, also high for this relationship by marriage.

This can be seen as part of the sibling syndrome of rivalrous, competitive tendencies that are sometimes expressed in the tattling and the deceptions so common among younger brothers and sisters as a part of sibling rivalry. Our hypothesis is that these patterns persist into adulthood in some cases and are reflected in the sibling-in-law relationships, as we will detail in later chapters (Chapters 11, 12).

To the extent to which mother-in-law is immature in behaving like a tattling sister rather than as a mother, she too makes things difficult among her grown children and her children-in-law.

### Jealous Mothers-in-Law

One of the things that makes life difficult for relatives by marriage is that the in-law "Is jealous, rivalrous, envious, covets what we have, etc." Out of 95 mentions of this criticism, 33 are attributed to mothers-in-law.

Sister-in-law offends in this regard more frequently than does mother-in-law, with 50.5% and 34.7% respectively. The differences are not significant. Daughter-in-law accounts for 7.4% of the mentions of jealousy. Brother-in-law ranks third, with 5.3%. The remainder of criticisms of jealousy are attributed to others-in-law (2.1%).

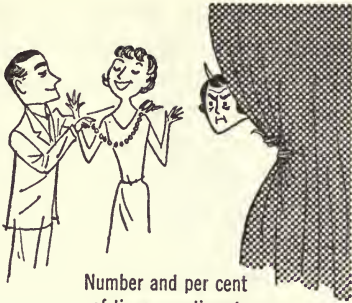


TABLE 26

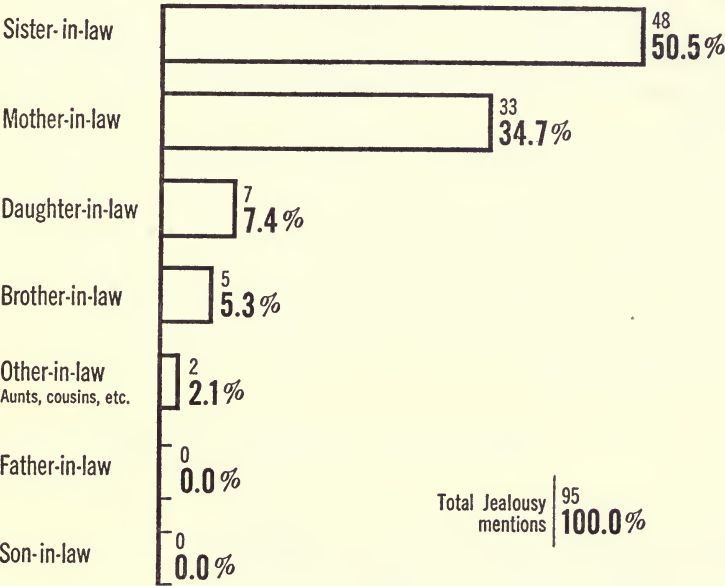
Jealousy mentioned  
as specific complaint:  
by In-laws

"He/She is jealous, rivalrous, etc."

"Most difficult In-law"



Number and per cent  
of times mentioned



Jealousy between relatives by marriage is a part of the sibling syndrome of rivalry carried over into adulthood. Sisters-in-law and brothers-in-law account for more than one-half of all mentions of this sort (55.8%). This complaint is characteristic of female in-laws, in the overwhelming percentage of mentions (94.7%). Of the male in-laws to whom this trait is attributed, only brothers-in-law are mentioned.

Mothers-in-law who are criticized for being jealous, rival-

rous, show up in the interviews as the immature women who tend to compare possessions and persons, much as little girls do. There seems to be a close association between this tendency and the proclivity to immaturity. Both tend to be characteristic of females in this study. Males, being encouraged to become independent at earlier ages, may mature earlier in these respects than do girls.

The last two complaints in the rank order, "Does not do own job well," and "Drinks, gambles," account for only one per cent of the complaints leveled against mother-in-law. These, therefore, are considered relatively unimportant as complaints of mother-in-law. They will be treated in further detail in the chapters dealing with in-laws ranking high in them.

Men criticize their mothers-in-law less than do women, but those men who do tell the ways in which they find their mothers-in-law difficult mention the same things in similar percentages to those of women. Although a slightly larger percentage of younger men and women than older men and women indicate difficulties with their mothers-in-law, the differences are not significant and the spread of criticisms is remarkably similar.

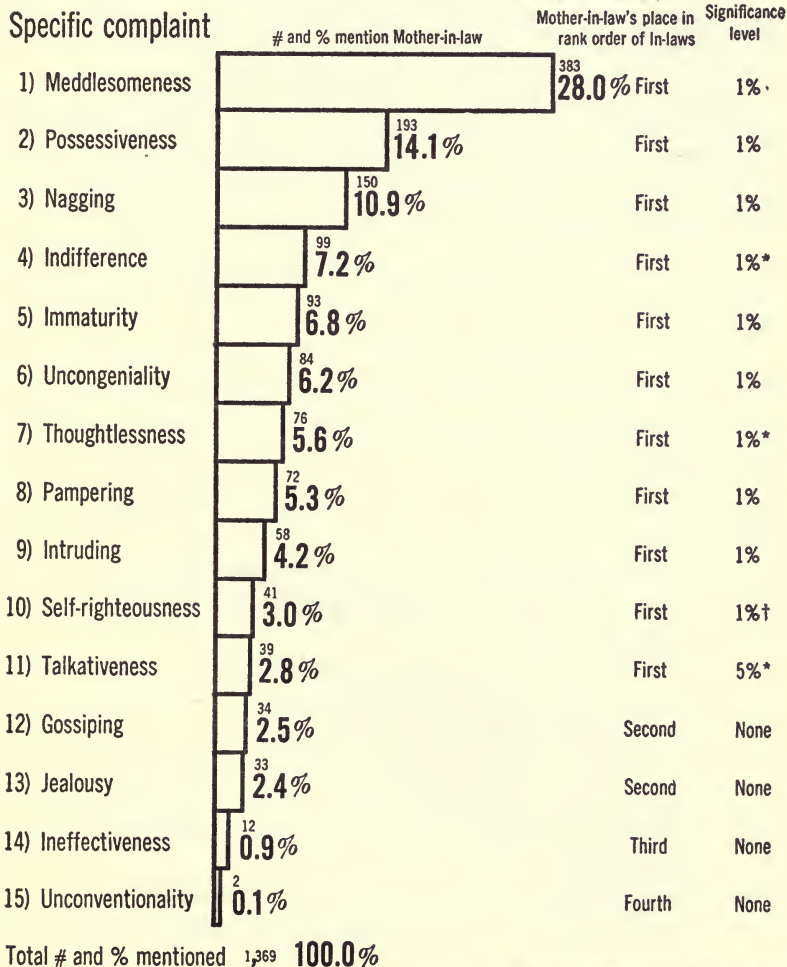
### **What Makes Mother-in-Law Most Difficult (Summary)**

Mother-in-law is by far the most difficult in-law. When men and women are given an opportunity to indicate who in their experience is the most difficult of in-laws, more mention mother-in-law than any other relative by marriage. This first place accorded mother-in-law is significant at the one per cent level. It may represent in part a reflection of the mother-in-law stereotype that creates a certain expectancy of difficulty with mother-in-law.

There seem to be certain elements in the mother-in-law relationship that make it peculiarly troublesome. By analyzing just what it is that the most difficult in-law does and does not

TABLE 27

# What makes Mother-in-law most difficult: by rank order and significance



\*Except Sister-in-Law

†Except Siblings-in-Law

do that causes trouble, the areas in which mother-in-law most often is criticized become clear. These specific criticisms are listed in rank order in Table 12 at the beginning of the chapter.

The mother-in-law syndrome of meddlesomeness, possessiveness, and nagging account for more than one-half of all complaints against mother-in-law. Closely related to the mother-in-law syndrome are three others: pampering, intruding, and self-righteousness. These six account for two-thirds of the difficulties reported in mothers-in-law.

Small percentages of the criticisms of mother-in-law have to do with her immaturity and her tendency to be old-fashioned and uncongenial. In each of these, mother-in-law is significantly the worst offender of all in-laws for whom the traits are mentioned.

In eleven out of fifteen types of complaints against in-laws, mother-in-law ranks in first place among in-laws as the most difficult.

This is overwhelming evidence that the mother-in-law is the most criticized of all relatives by marriage. That she receives the largest percentage of complaints is indicative of the hazardous role she plays.

Several questions for further research exploration arise in this phase of the study:

1. How much does the mother-in-law stereotype in our culture influence the naming of mother-in-law as most difficult in-law?
2. Of those who actively repudiate the mother-in-law stereotype, what percentage would name mother-in-law as most difficult of all in-laws?
3. Twenty-five per cent of the men and women interviewed indicated no problems with their in-laws. Is this implied intrafamily harmony general within the larger population?
4. To what extent does refusal to name mother-in-law most difficult of in-laws represent cultural repression



of family conflict, and/or sacredness of the mother figure? Is this a valid interpretation of the low percentages of Roman Catholics who mention mother-in-law as most difficult of in-laws?

5. To what extent does acknowledgment of in-law troubles represent actual stress between relatives, and to what extent does it indicate freedom to recognize family problems?
6. Why do members of liberal Jewish groups name mother-in-law as difficult significantly more often than do those of Christian orientation? Is it because the great changes in personal and family living are bringing new conceptions of roles at uneven rates within the family, and that these cause conflicts within such rapidly secularized subcultures as the liberal Jewish represent? Or?
7. Why do nine out of ten mentions of mother-in-law as most difficult come from women rather than from men? Is the in-law problem basically one of the interrelationships of the women of the family? Is it because of the ascribed roles within our culture that make family harmony the woman's responsibility? Or are there other explanations?
8. Is it wisdom accumulated through the years or identification with the mother-in-law as she nears her age that accounts for the older woman's less frequent mention of mother-in-law as difficult?
9. Is the mother-in-law syndrome that emerges so clearly in these data a sound workable concept?
10. Is the "complaint of distance," which ranks fourth in the mother-in-law criticisms here, an indication of the ambivalence of children-in-law, who complain if mother-in-law is too close, and criticize her too when she remains aloof? Or, are there subtle elements of acceptance and rejection that are operating in these data?

11. Mother-in-law has the highest percentage of mentions as being uncongenial and old-fashioned. Is this because she finds it hard to keep up with rapidly changing times? Is it because she, being the mother, has been expected to remain close home? Or, is it because labeling parents as out of step with the times is a popular mode of emancipation among youth today?
12. What roles can mother-in-law play that assure family harmony? Are there valid generalizations, or are her roles defined entirely by the particular situation?

#### REFERENCE SOURCES

1. Paul Wallin, "Sex Differences in Attitudes to In-Laws," *American Journal of Sociology*, March, 1954, pp. 466-469.
2. R. B. Vance, "Regional Family Patterns: The Southern Family," *American Journal of Sociology*, May, 1948, pp. 426-429.
3. In a personal communication dated May 2, 1954, from Ivan Nye, Bucknell University, Lewisburg, Pa.

## Sister-in-Law Is a Real Problem

SISTER-IN-LAW is the Number Two hazard among in-laws. She comes second to mother-in-law in number of complaints and in the experience of most people. In several respects sister-in-law outdistances mother-in-law in troublesomeness.

Sister-in-law is a center of strain in other cultures too. Margaret Mead<sup>1</sup> reports that in the Admiralty Islands the sister-in-law relationship is one of strain and opposition. The wife enters the husband's family as a stranger and hostility ensues between her and his sisters, who until then have given him female companionship. Among the Manus, Mead reports that the wife is obligated to care for her sister-in-law during pregnancy and childbirth; and that this is a troublesome, annoying, and nonreciprocal discharge of duty. Generally, among these peoples, sisters-in-law are institutionally opposed to each other.

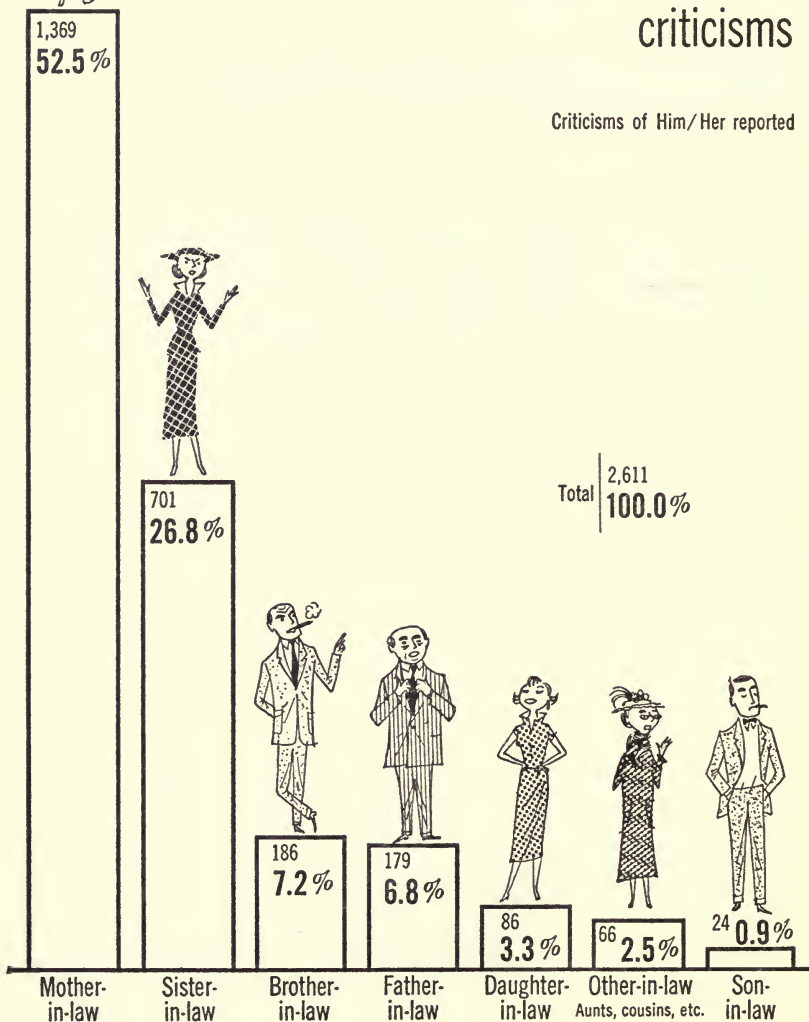
Here in the United States it is generally expected that mother-in-law is most troublesome. The stereotyped hostility-humor and avoidance are directed exclusively toward her. Sister-in-law, however, is *not* the butt of in-law jokes. Nor is she generally assumed to be particularly troublesome. Yet, she is mentioned as being difficult significantly more frequently than any other in-law except the mother-in-law.

Out of 2,611 criticisms directed at in-laws, 701 (26.8%)

TABLE 28

# In-laws found most difficult by frequency of criticisms

Criticisms of Him/Her reported





are those attributed to sisters-in-law. Table 28 gives the rank order of in-laws by percentage of mentions of what makes them most difficult.

Table 28 compares with Table 11 in Chapter 10. Table 28 gives percentages of the things that in-laws do that make them difficult by rank order of offending in-laws. Table 11 gives the rank order of the in-laws named most difficult by the 1,337 persons participating in the group interview phase of the study. In both tables the sister-in-law is seen to be second only to the mother-in-law in troublesomeness, and to have a significantly larger percentage of criticisms than any other in-law except the mother-in-law.

In some ways the sister-in-law appears to resemble the mother-in-law in the kinds of things that men and women report she does to make life difficult. In most of these she is found to be less often criticized than the mother-in-law, but significantly more often than other in-laws. In several characteristics, sister-in-law is found to be more troublesome than even the mother-in-law. In general, the criticisms made of sister-in-law are distributed through the entire roll call of complaints of in-laws, with from 17.5% to 50.5% of particular criticisms of all in-laws laid at her door.

The roster of things sister-in-law does that make life difficult for her relatives by marriage is found in Table 29. These are the things reported by the 272 men and women who in their experience have found sister-in-law most difficult of in-laws. These 272 persons represent 27.4% of the 992 men and women who report that they have trouble with their in-laws (1,337 minus 345 persons with no in-law problems. See Table 11).

### **Interfering Sisters-in-Law**

The criticisms most frequently made of sister-in-law are that she meddles, interferes, gives unwanted advice, and so on. The percentage (18.5%) of this complaint is larger than that of any other objectionable trait mentioned as making sister-in-

TABLE 29

SISTER-IN-LAW DIFFICULTIES REPORTED BY 272 PERSONS

<i>What Sister-in-Law Does That Makes Her Most Difficult</i>	<i>Specific Criticism Named Number Per Cent</i>	
1. Meddles, interferes, dominates, intrudes on privacy, etc.	130	18.5
2. Ignores us, is indifferent, uninterested, unso- ciable, aloof, etc.	72	10.3
3. Is thoughtless, inconsiderate, selfish, unappre- ciative, etc.	72	10.3
4. Nags, criticizes, complains, finds fault, ridicules, etc.	69	9.8
5. Clings, is immature, irresponsible, childish, de- pendent, etc.	49	7.0
6. Is jealous, rivalrous, envious, covets what we have, etc.	48	6.9
7. Tattles, gossips, exaggerates, lies, is deceitful, insincere, etc.	47	6.7
8. Is self-righteous, always right, egotistical, smug, bragging, etc.	39	5.6
9. Is not a good mother, neglects her family, is extravagant, etc.	37	5.2
10. Disagrees on traditions, has different standards, uncongenial	36	5.1
11. Is possessive, demanding, overprotective, forces attention, etc.	33	4.7
12. Talks too much, asks useless questions, doesn't listen, etc.	28	4.0
13. Takes sides, plays favorites, shows partiality, pampers, spoils	18	2.6
14. Abuses hospitality, comes without invitation, overstays visits	18	2.6
15. Drinks, gambles, is unconventional, unfaithful, etc.	5	0.7
Total	701	100.0

law difficult. In comparison with mother-in-law, sister-in-law is significantly less meddlesome. While 65.1% of meddlesomeness mentions are attributed to mother-in-law, but 22.1% are associated with sister-in-law (Table 13), a difference significant at considerably more than the one per cent level.

Except for mother-in-law, sister-in-law is more frequently objectionable in meddling and interference than any other in-law. Some of the several things that men and women say sister-in-law does that they find difficult in this category are listed below:

My sister-in-law wants to direct and advise everyone in the family how to act or what to do in *every* situation, although she has no particular experience on which to base her perpetual telling you what to do. (40-year-old North Carolina woman)

She [sister-in-law] takes too much authority upon herself, answers all questions, and makes all decisions without consulting her husband. (42-year-old Indiana woman)

The meddling sister-in-law—if she had not attempted to advise on matters about which she was relatively ignorant—such as insurance, homemaking problems, etc. She could have helped best by simply being friendly and not advising. (35-year-old Los Angeles man)

My sister-in-law should mind her own business. (37-year-old Chicago woman)

I wish my sister-in-law would not interfere with my children and cause friction between my husband and his mother. (46-year-old North Carolina woman)

These are but a few of the 130 mentions of meddling and interfering by sisters-in-law. They give evidence of the annoyance felt by relatives by marriage in families when sister-in-law butts into personal-family affairs. Some seem to arise out of the sister-in-law's inability to realize that her married brother is a grown man capable of managing his own affairs. In this respect the sister-in-law resembles many a mother-in-law. In other cases the sister-in-law's interfering seems to be a continuation of patterns of quibbling and bickering that had their origins in sibling rivalry early in the childhood of the brother and sister.

### **Unfriendly Sisters-in-Law**

Cold, aloof, unfriendly, nonaccepting sisters-in-law make things difficult, especially for the women of the family. Rela-

tively few men mention these traits as troublesome (only 4 of the 69 mentions), while 10% of the women specify this problem out of their experience with sisters-in-law.

Sister-in-law is mentioned as being unfriendly and non-accepting by one out of three (31.0%) of all criticisms of this type (Table 17). She is second only to mother-in-law in the frequency of complaints of distance. Verbatim reports from women who find their sisters-in-law their most difficult relative by marriage reveal the nature of the problem. Excerpts appear below:

My sister-in-law is completely cold and unfriendly, thereby making contact with my brother's family impossible. We never have any verbal quarrels, but outwardly she is always coolly pleasant. (55-year-old New Jersey woman)

Sister-in-law is most difficult in-law because of her lack of friendliness—no participation in family activity. Displays no interest in family affairs, fun or otherwise. (47-year-old Kansas City Catholic woman)

It would have helped me in my relationship in the family if my sisters-in-law had treated me as a sister, instead of always as an outside member. (55-year-old California teacher)

I wish she would entertain brother's people more often. (31-year-old Mississippi woman)

She resents close family relationship between her husband's folks. (27-year-old South Dakota teacher)

It is evident that women expect the female relatives by marriage to welcome them into the family, and be friendly, sociable, and interested. Quite as many older women as younger mention the lack of friendliness in sisters-in-law as a problem. This would indicate that if the sisters-in-law have been nonaccepting, the aloofness continues to rankle within the family through the years. We saw in Chapters 5 and 6 that when the mother-in-law wholeheartedly accepts the new member of the family, there is mutual warmth and affection from the first. Conversely, it would seem that when the



women of the family are aloof and unfriendly, it is difficult to establish the kind of close family ties that many women especially desire.

### **Thoughtless Sisters-in-Law**

"She is thoughtless, inconsiderate, selfish, and unappreciative of what we try to do for her," say men and women of their sisters-in-law. More than one-third (34.9%) of all mentions of this complaint fall to the sister-in-law (Table 20). Sister-in-law has about the same percentage of this characteristic as the mother-in-law (36.8%), and considerably more than any other relative by marriage.

Thoughtlessness, indicated by men and women in similar proportions, represents 10.3% of all criticisms of sisters-in-law. They mention such forms of the problem as are indicated below:

I wish my sister-in-law would not be so selfish; would appreciate what I tried to do for her; and would not ask so many favors and do so little to reciprocate. (49-year-old North Carolina woman)

She ought not to expect all the family property as she does. It would help too if she would answer questions in letters, and other things pertinent to good family relations. (44-year-old North Carolina woman)

My sister-in-law might be more considerate of others and learn to give and take. (48-year-old Mississippi woman)

She should consider her mother more in everyday relationship. (42-year-old New Jersey woman)

She never acknowledges presents. (45-year-old New Jersey woman)

These reports of the ways in which sisters-in-law make things difficult in the family indicate in general that sometimes sister-in-law does not stand up well in the close relationships of the larger family. She is expected to be thoughtful, appreciative, and unselfish, and when she fails in these attributes, she is found "difficult" by her relatives by marriage.

### Critical Sisters-in-Law

The fourth ranking complaint made of sister-in-law is that she criticizes, complains, and finds fault. Sixty-nine of the 701 criticisms of sister-in-law are of this nature (9.8%). This represents 25.0% of all mentions of this complaint among in-laws (Table 15). Sisters-in-law are mentioned as being overly critical only half as frequently as are mothers-in-law (54.3%), but otherwise offend in this trait more than any other in-law.

Verbatim comments of men and women on what makes sister-in-law their most difficult in-law relation follow:

She criticizes me in front of my husband. (27-year-old Kansas City Catholic woman)

She complains about her brother; she complains about her husband's mother; she finds fault with all of us. (45-year-old Los Angeles teacher)

My sisters-in-law have a critical attitude toward their brother (my husband). (45-year-old New Jersey woman)

My sister-in-law nags her family in the presence of strangers. (51-year-old Indiana woman)

She criticizes my husband incessantly. (47-year-old Mississippi woman)

She makes derogatory remarks about my children. (46-year-old Mississippi woman)

Comparison of me with women my husband "might have married." (48-year-old New Jersey woman)

These tendencies of sister-in-law to be critical seem to have at least two bases. In one type of case, the sister-in-law continues to "pick on" her brother as she did as a child, much to the distress of his wife. In the other variety of the problem, the sister-in-law is the "outsider" who comes into the family with a chip on her shoulder and a tendency to find fault with everyone and everything in it. These multiple sources of difficulty with sisters-in-law are to be expected since sisters-in-law are of several kinds: brother's wife, wife's sister, husband's

brother's wife, and husband's sister. Of these, the wife's sister is least often difficult in these data.

### **Dependent Sisters-in-Law**

Seven per cent of all complaints of sisters-in-law say that they are immature, irresponsible, or dependent. This is about the same percentage of immaturity mentions chalked up for the mother-in-law. However, where mother-in-law accounts for 50.8%, sister-in-law is responsible for 26.8% of dependency complaints (Table 18), a difference significant at the one per cent level. Except for mother-in-law, sister-in-law has a higher percentage of dependency mentions than all other in-laws combined. Here are some of the ways in which men and women find this characteristic difficult in sisters-in-law:

I wish my sister-in-law would make plans for the future other than living with us in later life; and learn to manage her finances. (47-year-old Kansas City woman)

She asks for money . . . gets hurt feelings . . . is like a child. (31-year-old Mississippi woman)

Sister-in-law should cease being such a hypochondriac. (34-year-old Kansas City Baptist man)

She just doesn't accept responsibility. (26-year-old South Dakota teacher)

Two emphases are apparent in the experiences of the men and women who report that their sisters-in-law are dependent. One is the tendency for the sister-in-law to be neurotic and worried, and to take her burden of fears to her married brother's home. The other trend is in the direction of the sister-in-law's financial irresponsibility and dependency.

It would be interesting to know how many of the women who fall in the category of dependent and immature sisters-in-law are themselves unmarried. It might well be that the unmarried sister sometimes develops the habit of clinging to her brother, and to expect his family to make a home for her. This was the expected thing in families a few generations ago.

The unmarried sister customarily made her home with her married brother or sister, helped with the children, and was a member of the family throughout her lifetime.

Such dependency patterns today are inappropriate and uncomfortable in many modern families. And women who persist in being weak, irresponsible, immature members of the family may expect to elicit the kinds of criticisms uncovered here.

### Jealous Sisters-in-Law

Out of 701 things mentioned as making sister-in-law the most difficult of in-laws, 48 criticisms were of her tendency to be jealous, rivalrous, envious. This represents 6.9% of the complaints of sister-in-law, and 50.5% of the jealousy mentions (Table 26). This means that more than half of all the times jealousy is mentioned as making for in-law difficulties, it is attributed to the sister-in-law. In this, the sister-in-law tops all in-laws, exceeding even the percentage of mentions of jealousy attributed to mother-in-law (34.8%). Women more than men are concerned about this problem. Only one of the 48 mentions of jealousy in sisters-in-law comes from a man. Some of the things women say in this category are listed here in their own words:

The worst thing about my sister-in-law is her jealousy over respective financial and social success of the more successful members. (50-year-old New Jersey woman)

I feel she is jealous of me as the only sister of her husband. (47-year-old Kansas City Catholic woman)

I wish she'd get over her childish envy of the rest of her brothers and sisters. (46-year-old North Carolina woman )

The wife of my husband's brother is jealous of her husband's friends. (30-year-old New York teacher)

Apparently, some women carry over into adulthood competitive feelings that had their origin in early sibling rivalry. These rivalrous tendencies between branches of a family can and do make for trouble. When a sister-in-law is jealous



of her brother's friends and family, social and financial success, the wife is bound to feel her envy and to react negatively to it.

A second source of the jealousy found in sisters-in-law is the close bond the girl has had with her brother in their parental home, which later interferes with her acceptance of her brother's wife as a full-fledged member of the family. This is a form of the possessiveness seen in mother-in-law, and is basically an unwillingness to relinquish the beloved male to another woman.

### **Gossiping Sisters-in-Law**

Sister-in-law tops all in-laws as a gossip. She is criticized for tattling, misrepresenting facts, being deceitful and dishonest in the things she says about members of the family, in 46.5% of all mentions of this complaint (Table 25). Women more than men are troubled by this problem in sisters-in-law, with 42 of the 47 mentions coming from women. This characteristic in sister-in-law that makes her the most difficult in-law ranks in seventh place, with 6.7% of all criticisms of sister-in-law.

Here is the way the problem is stated by women reporting sister-in-law problems:

She definitely exaggerates any tales and talks too much about them. (26-year-old South Dakota teacher)

She tells untruths about my personality. (46-year-old Mississippi woman)

She has a complete inability to be honest about facts in personal relationships. (30-year-old New Jersey woman)

My sisters-in-law tell one another things that are said and happen, and discuss my shortcomings with one another. (48-year-old Mississippi woman)

She will misinterpret any information to fit her conception of our marriage. (33-year-old University of Chicago student wife)

I wish she would stop being a gossip and a troublemaker. (49-year-old Indiana Extension worker)

Here we see another facet of the sibling syndrome of rivalrous, competitive tendencies that are sometimes expressed in the tattling and the deceptions so common among brothers and sisters of younger years. When these patterns of sibling rivalry persist into adulthood, they make for trouble in in-law relationships, and are especially troublesome to the women who represent the competing females in the man's life.

This is definitely a woman's problem, both in the one who causes the friction and the one who feels the pinch. The man in the case is the one that all the fussing is about, and he plays a central role only in a passive sense. He, occupied less with personal-family relationships about him than is either his wife or his sister, escapes both the temptation of gossip and its sting. The women of the household, by role definition concerned with family relationships, are sensitive to the problem and creators of it.

### Self-Righteous Sisters-in-Law

Thirty-nine of 701 things sisters-in-law do that make them most difficult in in-law relationships are being too self-righteous, egotistical, smug, boastful, "always right," etc. This represents 5.6% of the criticisms made of sisters-in-law, and 34.5% of all mentions of this trait (Table 23). Sisters-in-law are high-ranking offenders in self-righteousness mentions. Twice as many men report this trouble with their sister-in-law as would be expected by their numbers in the study. But women, too, wax eloquent on the troublesomeness of the self-righteous attitude in family relationships, as we see in the following comments:

I wish my sister-in-law would be less sure that everything that emanates from her and hers is perfect. (43-year-old Kansas City Catholic woman)

She can always prove that she is right . . . she pretends to more knowledge and goodness than she really has. (47-year-old Mississippi woman)

Sister-in-law—Raves about her own mother's cooking when she is a guest in my mother's home. If only she would not be so sure that she is always right. (40-year-old North Carolina woman)

This characteristic of sister-in-law seems in part to be related to the rivalrousness and competitiveness of siblings. Both in the one reporting and in the one being criticized there is apparent a defensiveness and an eagerness to be recognized as adequate.

The tendency to be boastful in some cases looks like a bid for acceptance as a member of the family. Unfortunately, because the behavior seems self-righteous, it is rebuffed, and acceptance is only further delayed. Men as well as women find it hard to accept the relative by marriage who insists upon being superior, thereby casting them in an inferior role.

Older sisters sometimes identify with the mother and fall into the mistake of "lording it over" their younger brothers and their families with the self-righteousness that is a part of the mother-in-law syndrome. Here, the distinctions made between elder sister and younger sister, common in other cultures, might be helpful in analyzing further the roots of the self-righteousness aspect of sister-in-law troubles.

### **Incompetent Sisters-in-Law**

Sister-in-law heads the list of in-laws criticized for being incompetent and inadequate in their own jobs. Three times as many mentions of this complaint are attributed to sister-in-law as to mother-in-law (38.1% and 12.4% respectively). Although the personal inadequacy of the sister-in-law is but 5.2% of all criticisms of her, it is significant in that it appears to be characteristic of siblings-in-law more than any other in-law relationship. Brother-in-law and sister-in-law together get two out of three (65.9%) of all mentions of incompetency in their own jobs. Men as well as women are sensitive to incompetency in their siblings-in-law, appearing in proportion to their numbers in the study with criticisms of these

inadequacies in their sisters-in-law. Verbatim comments selected to illustrate the problems are listed below:

I wish she would take an interest in her family, and give her daughter basic guidance. (49-year-old Indiana Extension worker)

My sister-in-law should be more attentive to her children and use more common sense. (45-year-old Mississippi woman)

It bothers me that she is not kind to her child. (40-year-old North Carolina woman)

I wish she would be susceptible to growth, that she would be sincerely interested in her husband's growth and advancement, and that she would be interested in helping others. (46-year-old North Carolina man)

She mistreats her husband and falls down on her job as a wife. (50-year-old South Dakota woman)

I would like to help her make a happier home for her husband and her children. But how can I as her in-law help her get along with her husband's family? (40-year-old North Carolina woman)

Sisters-in-law are seen to be incompetent when they fail to make a happy home for their husbands and children. Their relatives by marriage are concerned about what they view as neglect of children and husband. In these respects this may be the other side of the interference complaint. It is possible that some of the men and women who complain that their sisters-in-law are incompetent homemakers are viewed by those sisters-in-law as being meddling and interfering. Or, it may be a reflection of nonacceptance of the sister-in-law.

It is quite possible, too, that when a woman does fail as wife and mother, her in-laws are distressed to see their loved ones neglected, and yet find themselves relatively helpless to ameliorate the situation. Still another possible interpretation is that the standards and values of the siblings-in-law are different, and that these criticisms stem out of conflict in ways of living.

### **Uncongenial Sisters-in-Law**

Five per cent (5.1%) of all criticisms of sister-in-law are that she has different standards and disagrees on traditions, etc.



Sister-in-law accounts for 22.1% of all mentions of this problem among in-laws, being significantly outranked by mother-in-law (51.5%), but otherwise having a considerably higher percentage of this complaint than any other in-law (Table 19). Men contribute mentions of this problem more often than would be expected, while women are articulate on the matter, as is illustrated in the selected quotes below:

I'm concerned about the misunderstanding between my sister-in-law [husband's sister] and my mother. They come from different stations in life, one being social and academic and the other being hard-working. I wish they would quit trying to feel inferior or superior as the case may be. (31-year-old Kansas teacher)

My husband's brother's wife feels that her mother-in-law is against her because she is French and Catholic. (30-year-old upstate New York teacher)

My sister-in-law and I have differences of opinion in values, customs, and manners. She's too formal and expects me to be. (42-year-old Mississippi woman)

These three case excerpts illustrate one interesting aspect of this problem: that it is considered a difficulty even if the person reporting is not herself involved. This is particularly true of women in this group. If there is any friction among members of the extended family, even if it does not involve the woman herself, she often mentions it as a problem. Men on the other hand more frequently comment simply that their sister-in-law is "uncongenial," that "we have nothing in common," or that "she is not my kind of people." This difference in the interest shown by members of the two sexes probably reflects the differences in role assigned to men and women, with women more responsible for the intrafamily relationships than men are expected to be.

The fact that little more than 5% of all sister-in-law complaints are of her uncongeniality is worth some analysis. In the light of the large number of mixed marriages, the prevalence of social mobility—especially among women with the drive to "marry up," and considering the keen desire of young married persons to be accepted into their mates' fam-

ilies, there might have been expected a larger percentage of mentions of problems arising out of dissimilarities in background. That there is such a relatively small percentage of criticisms of this type may reflect the adequacy in assimilation and the absence of prejudice among the participants of this study.

### Demanding Sisters-in-Law

Thirty-three out of 701 "difficult sisters-in-law" are said to be demanding and possessive. This is 4.7% of the total number of things that sisters-in-law do that make them difficult as in-laws. It accounts for 13.1% of the total demandingness mentions, significantly less than the 76.6% attributed to mother-in-law, but larger than the percentage ascribed to other in-laws in the family (Table 14). In proportion to their numbers in the study, women more than men complain about sisters-in-law who are demanding and possessive. Those who fall in this group say such things as the following about their troubles with their sisters-in-law:

I wish my husband's sister would accept the fact that her brother is a man with a family rather than *her little brother!* (41-year-old North Carolina woman)

My sister-in-law should accept the fact that her brother is married; understand that his wife is also interested in his welfare, and be willing to give him up at least in part. (45-year-old Chicago nurse)

If only she could be less demanding of her brother (MY husband). (32-year-old Mississippi woman)

I wish she would stop making my husband feel sorry for himself. (27-year-old Kansas City Catholic woman)

She makes over my husband, is demanding of him and all but monopolizes him. (26-year-old South Dakota teacher)

She goes on and on about all she wants my husband to do for her, until she keeps him working for her all the time. (37-year-old Kansas woman)

In the cases that make up this part of the study it is the husband's sister who is the culprit. She it is who is criticized

for being possessive of her married brother. The wife feels "put out" that this other female demands so much of her husband's time and attention. She wishes this sister-in-law of hers would let her brother alone so that he could concentrate on being a good husband.

This problem does not appear in the case of the wife's sister. It apparently is a problem women face in releasing male siblings from the close brother-sister tie. The converse of the problem is relatively rare—that in which the brother's wife is accused of being possessive of her husband and not allowing him time for his sister. The sisters-in-law who are criticized as being too possessive and demanding of their brothers often are the older sisters who have so closely identified with their mothers that they fall into the hazards of the mother-in-law syndrome of difficulties in releasing their little brothers to others in marriage.

### **Talkative Sisters-in-Law**

Four per cent of the criticisms made of sisters-in-law is that they talk too much. These 28 mentions of talkativeness among sisters-in-law is 32.2% of the total for all in-laws, not significantly less than the 44.8% ascribed to mothers-in-law (Table 24). Other in-laws trail considerably behind these two female relatives by marriage, though not in significant numbers. The comments themselves are much like the ones made of the mother-in-law's behavior. Sister-in-law "rattles on and on," she "monopolizes conversation," she "asks useless questions," she indulges in "idle chatter," and so forth.

In every identifiable respect sister-in-law seems to resemble the mother-in-law in the ways in which she is criticized for being overly talkative. This may reflect the tendency among men and women to identify the sister-in-law with the spouse's mother. It may also be a symptom of the unconscious rejection of the sister-in-law by her relatives by marriage. In some instances it looks as though the sister-in-law is using talka-

tiveness as a cover for insecurity and a bid for attention in the family.

The role of talkativeness in interpersonal and intrafamily relations is one much in need of study. The whole area of sister-in-law difficulties is full of possibilities for further investigation.

### **Pampering Sisters-in-Law**

Sisters-in-law are not accused of pampering, spoiling, and taking sides as often as mothers-in-law. Sister-in-law receives but 17.5% of these complaints in comparison to mother-in-law's 69.9%, significant differences at better than the one per cent level (Table 21). Together these two in-laws account for more than 87% of the total number of mentions of this characteristic. In the rank order of complaints about the sister-in-law, partiality comes thirteenth, with but 2.6% of the total. Such comments as the following are typical:

I wish my husband's sister would not defend my husband against me. (35-year-old North Carolina woman)

I find it difficult to take her trying to confer individually with my husband in things in which I too should be consulted. (39-year-old Mississippi woman)

She caters and spoils my child a wee bit too much. I always feel on the spot too. We don't try to understand each other. She has no children to mess up her home and I feel I'm a poor housekeeper by comparison. (37-year-old Kansas woman)

The first two of these verbatim comments illustrate several in this group that have to do with the tendency of the husband's sister to continue to take his part after marriage in ways that his wife finds difficult. The wife is sensitive to the latent rejection that such partiality implies, and would prefer that she be accepted along with her husband within his family.

The third of the illustrative excerpts is an equally frequent complaint of the sister-in-law's tendency to spoil her nieces and nephews and thus make it difficult for their parents to match her indulgence. In one case of this kind it is evident



that the criticism comes from a mother who is herself so possessive of her children that she resents the attention paid them by her husband's sisters. In others, like the one above, the childless aunt pampers her brothers' or sisters' children to the annoyance of their parents.

In many ways the pampering and partiality seen in sister-in-law is like the possessiveness of the mother-in-law syndrome. In some cases, the boy's older sister was a kind of mother to him, and continues to behave as a mother figure even after his marriage.

In other ways, what is called pampering and partiality in sisters-in-law reflects the sibling syndrome of jealousy and competitiveness. The origins seem to lie in the original brother-sister relationship. The sibling rivalry between brother and sister initiated patterns of competitiveness that persist long after both are married, as we have seen in this and in previous sections of the chapter.

### **Intruding Sisters-in-Law**

If sisters-in-law follow some patterns found in the mother-in-law syndrome, as has been suggested in the analysis of some of the things they are said to do that make them difficult in-laws, then we would expect some intrusion among sisters-in-law. We find that one out of five (19.8%) criticisms of intruding, overstaying welcome, abusing hospitality, is attributed to sister-in-law. Mother-in-law is significantly the more frequently mentioned in this regard, with 63.7% of all complaints of intrusion; while all other in-laws trail with lesser percentages of the criticism (Table 22).

Intrusion accounts for 2.6% of all criticisms made of sisters-in-law. It is a problem to women members of the family. In this study women alone mention intrusion as the thing that makes their sister-in-law most difficult. The reason may well be that since men are not expected to take responsibility for entertaining, the problem of abuse of hospitality is not felt by them as much as by their wives, who bear the brunt of the burden.

Women voice their complaints of sister-in-law's intrusion in several ways, illustrated in the following excerpts:

I wish my sisters-in-law would not let their children eat and destroy furniture in my living room while they are visiting. Another thing I object to is their dropping in for free meals without invitation. (36-year-old North Carolina woman)

. . . at least she could let us know when she plans a visit with us, without coming in unannounced. (47-year-old Kansas City Catholic woman)

I wish she would not expect periodical visits. (30-year-old Mississippi woman)

My husband's brother's wife—I wish she would *reciprocate* invitations to the family. (33-year-old North Carolina woman)

These women seem to be saying that they do not like to be taken for granted. They like to entertain their relatives, but they do not appreciate those who drop in unannounced or who take advantage of their relatedness to abuse the family's hospitality. In these ways sister-in-law resembles the mother-in-law. Men are not sensitive to the problem apparently, since none of these mentions came from male members of the family. Nor do men fall guilty of the complaint in the vast majority of cases. Intrusion is a problem of the women of the household both in its active and in its passive phase.

### Unconventional Sisters-in-Law

Occasional sisters-in-law are criticized for drinking, for gambling, and for stealing other women's husbands. But, on the whole, this is not a problem of sisters-in-law in general. Ranking above sister-in-law in such unseemly behavior are both father-in-law and brother-in-law, who together total 69.6% of all complaints of this nature. Sister-in-law is more often criticized for such unconventionalities than is the mother-in-law, but the numbers of each are too small to be significant. This problem ranks last of all those attributed to sister-in-law, with a total of less than one per cent of them all (0.7%).

These sisters-in-law, then, appear to be the atypical family members who are a blot on the family record, but otherwise not particularly a part of the great in-law problem.

### **Sister-in-Law as a Problem (Summary)**

Sister-in-law is the second most difficult in-law. In both the number of persons reporting their most difficult in-law and the percentage of criticisms made of troublesome in-laws, sister-in-law ranks second only to mother-in-law.

In several ways sister-in-law shows symptoms of the mother-in-law syndrome. In her tendencies to meddle, to criticize, to be dependent, to be possessive, to pamper, and to intrude, sister-in-law appears like a somewhat dilute edition of the demanding, meddling mother-in-law whose reputation is established. These sisters-in-law seem to have the same difficulty as their mothers in letting their brothers go. They find it hard to share their beloved male with another woman—his wife. They persist in being mother figures of the more objectionable type. Apparently these are elder sisters of the husband more often than not. The wife's sister is rarely mentioned in this connection.

In some ways sister-in-law is troublesome to her relatives by marriage because of competitiveness, rivalry, tattling, boasting, etc., that constitutes the sibling syndrome. This is a constellation of symptoms and problems that seem to have their origins in the sibling rivalry between brother and sister as children. As patterns of bickering, comparing, and belittling continue on into adulthood, the spouses of the competing siblings are drawn into the quibbling orbit, much to their reported distress.

One out of five things (20.6%) that make sisters-in-law difficult has to do with their nonacceptance and inconsideration of their relatives by marriage. Obviously, this is one more facet in the acceptance desires of most men and women who report that they do not like to feel rejected by the family into

which they married, but rather appreciate what is done to make them feel a real part of the family.

Since women more than men are responsible for interpersonal and intrafamily relations, sisters-in-law as well as mothers-in-law are frequently criticized for failures in the extended family harmony.

The multiple bases for sister-in-law difficulties are expected because the term sister-in-law refers to several relationships: brother's wife, wife's sister, husband's sister, husband's brother's wife, and others more remotely related. Of these the wife's sister is least often a problem, and the husband's sister most often difficult.

Further research that makes distinctions between the various types of sisters-in-law as well as the elder sister—younger sister factor may be productive in clarifying the dynamics of sisters-in-law roles. Other specific questions that challenge further study in this section of the material are:

1. The wife's sister is least often reported of all sisters-in-law in this study. Is this the case in other populations? Why?
2. Is the husband's older sister usually most difficult as sister-in-law because she identifies with her mother in being possessive of her younger brother, and therefore has difficulty releasing him to his wife when he marries?
3. Is the husband's younger sister difficult as a sister-in-law because she carries over patterns of dependency upon her "big brother" that are burdensome to his wife?
4. Is "the complaint of distance" as we see it (aloofness, coolness, unfriendliness, etc.) more frequently made of sisters-in-law than brothers-in-law because the males are more accepting, or because the females of the family are more generally expected to be close to members of the extended family?
5. Do sisters-in-law become troublesome when they continue into adulthood the practices of teasing, tattling, competing, etc., established with their brothers in child-



hood? In other words are some in-law difficulties adult manifestations of sibling rivalry?

6. Is the "sibling syndrome" concept suggested in our data a helpful tool?
7. Is the husband's unmarried sister more likely than his married sister to be dependent upon him (financially, emotionally, socially) and hence a burden to his family, according to today's American standards?
8. Does incompetency rank high as a criticism of sisters-in-law because (1) men and women are concerned for the welfare of their loved ones and do not like to see them neglected? Or (2) is the complaint of inadequacy one type of nonacceptance of the "outsider"? Or (3) is it because differing standards within the homes of married brothers and sisters?

#### REFERENCE SOURCE

1. Margaret Mead, *Kinship in the Admiralty Islands*. New York: Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History, 1934, p. 305.

## Brother-in-Law Is Not So Bad

PEOPLE DO NOT OFTEN find brothers-in-law difficult to get along with. Out of the 1,337 men and women who participated in the group interview phase of this study, 72 (5.4%) report brother-in-law as their most difficult in-law. Of the 2,611 things that in-laws do that makes life difficult, 186 (7.2%) are attributed to brothers-in-law. In both the number of times he is named the most difficult in-law and in the number of criticisms made of him, brother-in-law ranks third of all relatives by marriage, being significantly less difficult than either sister-in-law or mother-in-law. He outranks father-in-law by but a fraction of one per cent (0.4%) in both criticisms and persons reporting. Men and women both mention brother-in-law as most difficult in proportions equivalent to their numbers in the sample.

The problems people report having with their brothers-in-law appear in rank order in Table 30.

In several ways difficulties with brothers-in-law are different from those that people report they have with their mothers-in-law, fathers-in-law, and sisters-in-law, as we see in the rank orders of the criticisms of each in the comparative table on page 246.

TABLE 30

BROTHER-IN-LAW DIFFICULTIES REPORTED BY 72 PERSONS

<i>What Brother-in-Law Does That Makes Him Most Difficult In-Law</i>	<i>Specific Criticism Named</i>	
	<i>Number</i>	<i>Per Cent</i>
1. Incompetency—does not do own job well	27	14.5
2. Immaturity—is childish, irresponsible, dependent, etc.	24	12.9
3. Thoughtlessness—is selfish, unappreciative, etc.	23	12.4
4. Indifference—is uninterested, not close, non-accepting, etc.	18	9.7
5. Self-righteousness—is superior, egotistical, boastful, etc.	17	9.1
6. Interference—is meddling, dominating, etc.	16	8.6
7. Criticalness—nags, complains, finds fault, etc.	14	7.5
8. Uncongeniality—different standards, intolerant, old-fashioned	12	6.5
9. Misrepresentation—gossips, rattles, exaggerates, etc.	8	4.3
10. Unconventionality—drinks, gambles, etc.	8	4.3
11. Possessiveness—is demanding, overprotective, forces attention	5	2.7
12. Rivalrousness—is jealous, envious, covetous, etc.	5	2.7
13. Partiality—takes sides, plays favorites, spoils, pampers, etc.	3	1.6
14. Intrusion—comes without invitation, abuses hospitality, etc.	3	1.6
15. Talkativeness—asks useless questions, chatters, etc.	3	1.6
Total	186	100.0

In comparison to parents-in-law, criticisms of brothers-in-law and sisters-in-law rank similarly in these ways: thoughtlessness (high), possessiveness (low), and intrusion (low). Criticisms of brother-in-law as being unconventional (drinking, gambling, etc.) rank similar to those of the father-in-law, consistently higher than for the mother-in-law and sister-in-law. The things that brother-in-law does that make him the most difficult of in-laws differ in their rank order of frequency of mentions in several characteristics analyzed in detail in the following sections.

TABLE 31

COMPARATIVE RANK ORDERS OF DIFFICULTIES WITH BROTHERS-IN-LAW AND OTHERS

<i>Criticisms Mentioned</i>	<i>Brother-in-Law</i>	<i>Sister-in-Law</i>	<i>Mother-in-Law</i>	<i>Father-in-Law</i>
Incompetency	1st	9th	14th	11th
Immaturity	2nd	5th	5th	9th
Thoughtlessness	3rd	3rd	7th	8th
Indifference	4th	2nd	4th	4th
Self-righteousness	5th	8th	10th	6th
Interference	6th	1st	1st	1st
Criticalness	7th	4th	3rd	2nd
Uncongeniality	8th	10th	6th	3rd
Misrepresentation	9th	7th	12th	14th
Unconventionality	10th	15th	15th	10th
Possessiveness	11th	11th	2nd	5th
Rivalrousness	12th	6th	13th	15th
Partiality	13th	13th	8th	12th
Intrusion	14th	14th	9th	13th
Talkativeness	15th	12th	11th	7th

### Incompetency in Brothers-in-Law

Brother-in-law outranks all other in-laws in not doing his own job well. This criticism ranks first for brother-in-law, with 14.5% of all problems with him. In sister-in-law, incompetency ranks ninth with 5.2%, in mother-in-law it ranks fourteenth with 0.9%, and in father-in-law it holds eleventh place with 3.9% of criticisms leveled against the relative. Thus, it is clear that more than other relatives by marriage, brother-in-law makes things difficult for the family by being incompetent.

Men mention this fault in their brothers-in-law more than twice as often as would be expected from their numbers in the sample. Men and women alike mention most frequently the brother-in-law's inability to support his family adequately. They say that their brothers-in-law make things difficult for them by not taking responsibility for their families and then looking to other relatives for financial help. They report that their brothers-in-law do not use their incomes wisely, and



thus endanger their families' security. Some say that they worry because their brothers-in-law won't stick to a job, or drift from one job to another. Such criticisms as these make up the majority of the things that men and women report they find most difficult in their brothers-in-law.

An articulate minority of both men and women say that the brother-in-law problem as they feel it lies in his limitations as husband and father. They are concerned that he does not discipline his children, that he neglects his wife, and that he does not assume his responsibility in his own home.

In general, the criticisms of the brother-in-law in the family fall in those areas where other relatives have to step in and take responsibilities, financial and otherwise, that they feel he should be assuming. Brother-in-law in these instances is portrayed as a ne'er-do-well. He is shown to be lazy, inefficient, and incompetent in the tasks expected of men in our society.

### **Immature Brothers-in-Law**

Immaturity ranks higher in brother-in-law than for any other in-law. Criticisms of being dependent, immature, childish, are second only in number and frequency to brother-in-law's incompetency. Nearly thirteen per cent (12.9%) of all criticisms of brother-in-law refer to his immaturity. Where immaturity ranks second for brother-in-law, it ranks fifth for sister-in-law and mother-in-law, and takes ninth place in the line-up of criticisms of father-in-law.

Interestingly enough, the problem of immaturity is three times more frequent in brothers-in-law than it is in fathers-in-law (13.1% and 4.4% of immaturity mentions respectively). Sisters-in-law and mothers-in-law have higher percentages of the complaint, since their numbers are much greater, but immaturity ranks fifth for these two female in-laws and second for brother-in-law, as seen in Table 31.

There is very little detailed elaboration among the mentions of brother-in-law's immaturity. Men and women in simi-

lar proportions tend to simply say, "He is immature"; "I wish he would grow up and reach emotional stability"; "Immature adults have always been the most difficult to deal with in any in-law situation, and brother-in-law is the worst"; "He lacks interests"; "He is unreliable"; and so on.

This problem with brothers-in-law seems to be closely related to the first-ranking difficulty—incompetency. Men and women often mention both characteristics together in referring to their brothers-in-law. The constellation is one of an immature adult male who has not grown up enough to assume real responsibility, and who thus continues to be dependent upon relatives to carry his burdens.

### **Thoughtless Brothers-in-Law**

Thoughtlessness ranks in third place for both brother-in-law and sister-in-law, with 11.3% and 34.9% respectively. In comparison, thoughtlessness in mother-in-law and father-in-law ranks in seventh and eighth places respectively. This characteristic of siblings receives 12.4% of all complaints of brothers-in-law. Men in larger proportions than their percentage in the sample join women in saying the problems they face with their brothers-in-law have to do with his tendencies to be thoughtless.

Typical comments in this category are that the brother-in-law thinks only of himself; that he is not appreciative of what is done for him; that he has a tendency to "use" other members of the family; that he is inconsiderate and unreasonable. An obstetrical nurse in the study reports a brother-in-law who would not tell his mother-in-law when his wife (her daughter) was going to the hospital to have a baby, although the daughter wanted her to come. Several others complain that although they have repeatedly helped their brothers-in-law out financially and otherwise, he does not express his appreciation, and sometimes is not even civil to them.

This is tied in with the complaint of the brother-in-law's incompetency and immaturity. He doesn't do his own job

well; he is immature and dependent, and needs help from the family. Being immature, he cannot be appreciative but rather tends to become sullen and even more selfishly inconsiderate as the problem continues.

### **Indifference in Brothers-in-Law**

Indifference ranks fourth place or higher in all in-laws analyzed to date. It has to do with the tendency of relatives by marriage to appear indifferent and uninterested in their in-laws, and so to increase their difficulties in becoming accepted into the family.

Nearly 10% (9.7%) of all criticisms of brothers-in-law are that they are indifferent and aloof. This is about the same percentage of the problem reported with sisters-in-law (10.3%), mothers-in-law (7.2%), and fathers-in-law (9.5%).

Men as well as women are concerned about the indifference of their brothers-in-law. Some of the things they say are, "He appears to take no interest in us or in the family"; "We wish he would visit more often"; "I wish my brothers-in-law could be more friendly to the new bride, and be more helpful when needed"; "I wish he would accept me as his brother's wife"; "He might make me more comfortable in his home"; "I wish he cared enough to visit and let us feel that we are of the same family."

In this characteristic brother-in-law is no better and no worse than other in-laws. The complaint of distance is one that appears high in the mentions of every in-law problem. It is an eloquent expression of the need that most men and women have for belonging to the family into which they marry—of finding acceptance, interest, and helpfulness in their in-law relationships.

### **Self-Righteous Brothers-in-Law**

Self-righteousness ranks slightly higher in brothers-in-law than in other relatives by marriage. It falls in fifth place, with 9.1%

of the complaints attributed to brother-in-law; in eighth place, with 5.6% of those attributed to sister-in-law; in tenth place, with 3.0% of those related to the mother-in-law; and in sixth places, with 7.3% of the problems that make father-in-law difficult.

The tendency to be self-righteous, superior, smug, and boastful is more often one for which male in-laws are criticized than are females. In this problem brother-in-law outdistances father-in-law only slightly, while both of them are considerably more troublesome to their in-laws in this way than are women relatives by marriage.

Men as frequently as women complain about the brother-in-law's self-righteous ways within the family. They complain that brother-in-law indulges in "self-elevation"; "Assumes a rather overbearing attitude towards all members of the family"; "Acts so superior all the time;" "Won't accept the viewpoint of others"; "Lords it over us"; "Is never wrong about anything"; and "Is so smug I could punch him one."

It is quite possible that there is a connection between the frequency of the complaint of self-righteousness and the four top-ranking criticisms of brother-in-law. If he is found to be incompetent and immature, he may feel on the defensive and respond with behavior that is considered to be superior to that which he merits. His indifference and thoughtlessness may be linked with his self-righteousness by those in the family who feel that they are carrying more of his burden than is comfortable and that he should respond with more appreciation.

There is a common element of assuming a superior status in this characteristic and the two that rank next: interference and criticalness. In each case the brother-in-law is criticized as behaving as though the other in-law is inferior and more culpable than he.

### **Interference in Brothers-in-Law**

Meddling, interfering, and dominating ranks first for some in-laws (mother-in-law, sister-in-law, and father-in-law).



But, it ranks fifth in complaints of brothers-in-law, with 8.6% of all mentions of difficulty. This is significantly less often than it appears in the problems caused by other in-laws, with but 2.7% of the total number of times it is mentioned.

Among the people who complain that their brothers-in-law are interfering and dominating, men appear more often than would be expected by their numbers in the sample. Both men and women report that their brothers-in-law are difficult when they "Try to dominate"; "Don't respect our wishes"; "Are domineering"; "I have five brothers-in-law and they all think it necessary to hold council and solve all our problems—I wish they wouldn't bother"; "They interfere with future plans"; "I wish my brother-in-law would be more of a 'we' partner in business than an 'I' with my husband"; "Keep their opinions to themselves unless asked for them and mind their own business"; and "Is as meddlesome as an old woman."

The husband's older brothers are mentioned more frequently in this group than other brothers-in-law. It may be that the older brothers in some families develop the habit of dominating their younger brothers in childhood, and that these patterns persist into adulthood, much to the distress of the younger brother's wife. A follow-up study of in-law relationships would do well to distinguish between the various siblings-in-law, and especially to note the younger-older brother patterns and constellations of problems.

### **Critical Brothers-in-Law**

Criticalness ranks seventh in the criticisms made of brothers-in-law, with 7.5% of the complaints. This is a lesser rank than the problem of criticalness holds in father-in-law (2nd), mother-in-law (3rd), or sister-in-law (4th). Brother-in-law accounts for only 5.1% of the total number of mentions of this difficulty among in-laws.

Seemingly, men are not concerned with this problem in brothers-in-law. But women speak of it in no uncertain terms when they say: "He is always finding fault with what my

husband does”; “We feel that he is unjustly impatient with us”; “I wish he’d tell me what he has against me, so that I can change—he just complains without coming right out with what is the matter.”

Here again it seems to be the husband’s older brother who is most often involved in being overly critical and fault-finding. The wife’s brother is mentioned not at all, possibly because in our culture he is not expected to be responsible for her after her marriage (as is true of some simple, folk societies), and possibly because he is not as close geographically as is the husband’s family.

Younger brothers and unmarried brothers are rarely mentioned as being critical, perhaps because they are in inferior positions of influence in relation to the older married brother and his family.

Self-righteousness, interference, and criticalness are characteristic of the husband’s elder brother, who, dominating his “kid” brother in childhood, continues his supervision of his younger sibling even after marriage, in ways that are objectionable to the younger man’s wife. The delayed maturity of the younger brother in the presence of the older may contribute to the problem. The simplest solution would seem to be one of avoidance until the younger brother can stand on his own feet and rebuff the overprotectiveness of his older male siblings.

### **Brothers-in-Law Who Are Uncongenial**

Uncongeniality among siblings-in-law is not as frequent as it is in parents-in-law. This tendency to be uncongenial, to resist change, to be old-fashioned, and to have different standards is mentioned as a problem with brothers-in-law in but 6.5% of all criticisms of them, and in but 7.4% of all the times it is mentioned for any in-laws. It ranks eighth for brother-in-law, third for father-in-law, and sixth for mother-in-law.

These ratings may be largely due to the greater differences

between the generations, in a time of rapid social change, than are found within the same generation.

### **Gossiping Brothers-in-Law**

Gossiping, tattling, and misrepresenting facts about members of the family is not a particularly frequent problem of the brother-in-law. This complaint ranks ninth, with 4.3% of the complaints made of brother-in-law and 7.9% of all mentions of this difficulty among in-laws.

Men and women who mention this problem with brothers-in-law say: "He talks about relatives to others"; "Talks about you behind your back and tells lies about you outside the family"; "I wish he would try to be more truthful especially when he is speaking about our family"; "He carries tales"; and "Is just not an honest person."

The offending brother-in-law in these instances is often specified as the younger sibling of the husband. This may indicate the way in which the younger brother "gets back at" the older for his interference and superior ways, both of which are quite possibly patterns that have carried over from childhood.

### **Unconventional Brothers-in-Law**

Men more than women are accused by their in-laws of drinking, gambling, and being otherwise unconventional. This complaint ranks in tenth place for both the brother-in-law and the father-in-law, with 34.8% each of all mentions of this problem. Sister-in-law and mother-in-law are criticized rarely for being unconventional, and daughter-in-law not at all.

Of the things that brothers-in-law do that cause trouble in this category, the one most frequently mentioned is alcoholism. Next in order of frequency are gambling, "staying out all night with the boys," and "playing around with women." Men, more often than would be expected from their numbers

in the study, join women in complaining that such unconventional behavior in their brothers-in-law is a problem.

There is a connection between this criticism of brothers-in-law and the two top-ranking complaints made of them: incompetency and immaturity. The man who is accused of not taking responsibility for supporting his family is often the one who's criticized for "gambling it all away," or "drinking it up." The man who is considered undependable and childish is often one who expresses his immaturity in being dependent and irresponsible, and may look for "Mom in a Bottle."

### **Possessiveness Is Not a Problem with Brothers-in-Law**

Few brothers-in-law are accused of being possessive and demanding. This complaint ranks eleventh, with but 2.7% of all criticisms made of brothers-in-law and 1.9% of all mentions of the problem. Men do not refer to the difficulty at all in their mentions of the things that make brother-in-law difficult. In the five times that women comment upon brothers-in-law possessiveness, it is the husband's older brother's demands upon her husband that annoy the wife. Here we have apparently one further facet in the older-brother-in-law syndrome of problems in which the older brother is dominating, interfering, and demanding of his kid brother and his kid brother's family.

### **Jealousy Is Not a Man's Problem**

Jealousy seems to be a problem among female in-laws rather than among the men of the family. It appears as a factor causing difficulties in but 5.3% in brothers-in-law, not at all among fathers-in-law or among sons-in-law. Female relatives by marriage account for 94.7% of the jealousy mentions: mother-in-law 34.7%, sister-in-law 50.5%, daughter-in-law 7.4%, and aunts and other female in-laws 2.1%.

Not a man is responsible for the five mentions of jealousy, enviousness, and rivalrousness charges made of brothers-in-



law. The women who mention these things seem to feel that the men of the family are competitive and compare one another's families and possessions to the detriment of family morale. To the extent to which this is a problem it seems but an extension of the sibling rivalry troubles analyzed earlier.

### **Pampering Is Rarely Found in Brothers-in-Law**

Mother-in-law pampers (69.9%). Sister-in-law pampers and shows partiality (17.5%). But brother-in-law is criticized for pampering, spoiling, taking sides, and showing partiality in only 2.9% of the total mentions of this in-law problem. Men mention it as a problem with their brothers-in-law not at all. Women comment upon it only rarely, and then in connection with the infrequent tendencies of brothers-in-law to be overprotective and demanding.

### **Intrusion and Talkativeness Are Not Problems**

Only three times are brothers-in-law criticized by the men and women in this study either for intruding upon family members or for talking too much. These two characteristics tie at the last two places in the rank order of things that brothers-in-law do that make things difficult for their relatives by marriage.

Abusing hospitality and intruding accounts for but 1.6% of all criticisms of brother-in-law, and places fourteenth in the rank order. In comparison, this same problem ranks ninth for mother-in-law, with 63.7% of all mentions of this in-law difficulty.

Talkativeness ranks last for brother-in-law, twelfth for sister-in-law, eleventh for mother-in-law, and seventh for father-in-law. Men are not troubled by the talkativeness of their sons-in-law. The few women who complain comment incidentally that brother-in-law tends to monopolize conversation, does not listen to what is said, and is boring in his talk.

These two qualities, which in other relatives by marriage tend to be mentioned often as causing trouble, rank last in mentions of what makes brother-in-law most difficult. It is clear that these are not offenses of which brothers-in-law are guilty in the minds of any large percentage of their relatives.

The reason may simply be that brothers-in-law do not have the opportunities which others in the family have for falling into these in-law hazards. Even if the brother-in-law's children did run wild in a relative's home, it is not he but his wife who would be criticized for not keeping them in hand. If his family should drop in uninvited, it would be the wife who would be blamed, since it is she who is expected to uphold the amenities in intrafamily hospitality.

### **Sentiments About Brothers-in-Law (Summary)**

Brother-in-law is not often considered the in-law most difficult to get along with. When he is, it is most frequently for being incompetent and irresponsible. This is related to his immaturity, his tendencies to "use" his relatives, to be dependent upon them, and to be thoughtlessly inconsiderate and unappreciative in his relationships with them.

The husband's older brother tends to be self-righteous, interfering, and critical in the eyes of his younger brother's wife. This is seen to be a carry-over from domination of the younger by the older brother in childhood. Possibly in retaliation, younger brothers are criticized for being belittling and tattling as the things they do that make things difficult for their older brothers' families. This, too, seems to be a pattern that has its roots in childhood.

Brothers-in-law, like fathers-in-law, are troublesome in their unconventional behavior, which probably is related to immaturity factors. They are seldom criticized in five of the fifteen complaints that cause difficulty among in-laws: possessiveness, jealousy, pampering, intrusion, and talkativeness. Brothers-in-law are felt to be indifferent and uninterested in about the same percentage as are other relatives by marriage,

reflecting the general need among both men and women to be accepted by relatives by marriage.

Leads for further investigation in this section of the pilot study are:

1. Incompetency and irresponsibility are the highest-ranking complaints of brothers-in-law. Does this reflect the cultural expectation that a good man in our society is a competent, adequate person, and that when he fails to measure up to his ascribed responsibilities he is criticized by the other members of his extended family? Or?
2. Brothers-in-law are rarely criticized for failing to relate well to other members of the family (possessiveness, jealousy, pampering, intrusion, and talkativeness are all high-ranking complaints of female in-laws). Is this because men in the larger family are particularly able in their interpersonal and intrafamily relationships, or is it rather because men are not held responsible for family harmony as are women?
3. Does the husband's older brother's tendency to be self-righteous and critical reflect a direct carry-over from the childhood domination of the younger brother by the older?
4. Does the husband's younger brother frequently resort to childhood practices in tattling and belittling in his adult relationships with his elder sibling's family?
5. Unconventionality is a frequent criticism of brothers-in-law. Is this because men have more freedom under our double standard for unconventional behavior? Or, is it a symptom of the male's immaturity?
6. Why is it that brother-in-law is so much less frequently mentioned as being difficult as an in-law than other relatives by marriage?

## Some Fathers-in-Law Are Troublesome

JACOB THOUGHT that he had a difficult father-in-law (Genesis 25:19–37:1). For seven years he worked for his prospective father-in-law to earn the right to marry Rachel, the younger daughter. Then Laban, her father, said that instead of Rachel, Jacob might marry Leah, the elder sister; and if he worked seven more years he might marry Rachel then. After fourteen years of such service, Jacob complained to his father-in-law:

“You know yourself how I have worked for you, and what your stock has become under my care; for it was little that you had before I came, whereas now it has expanded into a great deal, since the Lord blessed you upon my arrival. But when am I to make provision for my own household?”

Even after working twenty years for his father-in-law (fourteen for the two daughters’ hands, and six for the sheep), the old man insisted that he still owned the two women, their children, and the sheep Jacob raised for himself, when he says:

“The girls are my daughters, the children are my grandchildren, the flocks are my flocks—indeed everything that you see is mine.” (Genesis 31:43)



In some ways Robert Browning had an even more difficult time with his father-in-law; for Elizabeth Barrett was not only considered her father's personal property, but she herself was tied to him with a devotion not easy to overcome. She says in a letter dated 1838:

My beloved father has gone away; he was obliged to go two days ago, and took away with him, I fear, almost as saddened spirits as he left with me. The degree of amendment does not, of course, keep up with the haste of his anxieties. It is not that I am not better, but that he loves me too well; *there* was the cause of his grief in going. . . . His tears fell almost as fast as mine did when we parted. . . .<sup>1</sup>

The whole dramatic tale is familiar—the way the father ruled his adult children—his morbid attachment to Elizabeth as “the purest of my children”—his complete inability to accept the fact that she could be fond of anyone besides himself—her emancipatory lunge that was successful only with the help of her beloved Robert—and then the father's stony silence through the years of the Brownings' marriage, rejecting Robert to the last, and cutting them both out of his will. What a father-in-law!

The days of the patriarch are gone. No longer do fathers rule their grown children as did Laban and Mr. Barrett. Today, fathers-in-law figure rather incidentally in the in-law complaints of men and women. Only rarely does a father-in-law attempt to rule his children's family, as once was customary. Compared to the mother-in-law, father-in-law's influence is small indeed.

One extreme illustration of father-in-law's insignificance is found in the following case. The man is described as “quiet” and is said to never lift his voice in family affairs. His wife, in contrast, is considered to be a domineering woman who rules the roost, and has through the years. One by one the couple's sons grew up and went to college. One by one they were refused help from the family. As they see it, the reason was that their mother saw no sense in education and preferred her sons to go to work as soon as they were able. The father, a college man himself, sat by and let his sons struggle through college,

earning their own way, without lifting a finger to help them.

Then the oldest son married and brought his bride home for a visit. His mother was so hostile that the girl fled in tears to her father-in-law for comfort. But he only sat quietly smoking his pipe until the bride packed up and left her parents-in-law's home.

When 1,337 men and women name their most difficult in-law relationship, only 52 mention father-in-law (1.5%). Of the 2,611 things that are specifically mentioned as making in-law relationships difficult, 179 (6.8%) are attributed to fathers-in-law. This is significantly fewer than criticisms of mothers-in-law. Specific criticisms of father-in-law rank as shown in Table 32.

Some interesting differences are apparent in the rank order of criticisms of father-in-law as compared with that of mother-in-law (Tables 32 and 12 respectively). Possessiveness, which ranks second for mother-in-law, ranks fifth for father-in-law. Immaturity, which ranks fifth for mother-in-law, ranks ninth for father-in-law. Pampering, which ranks eighth for mother-in-law, ranks twelfth for father-in-law. Intrusion, ranking ninth for mother-in-law, ranks thirteenth for father-in-law. Thus, in four characteristics mother-in-law offends perceptibly more frequently than does father-in-law: possessiveness, immaturity, pampering, and intrusion. These are all related to the mother-in-law syndrome discussed in Chapter 10.

On the other hand, where uncongeniality ranks sixth for mother-in-law, it appears in third place for father-in-law. Where self-righteousness ranks tenth for mother-in-law, it ranks sixth for father-in-law. Where talkativeness ranks eleventh for mother-in-law, it comes in seventh place for father-in-law. Where unconventionality as seen in drinking, gambling, etc., ranks last at fifteenth place for mother-in-law, it ranks tenth for father-in-law. Incompetence in terms of not doing one's own job well ranks fourteenth for mother-in-law and eleventh for father-in-law. So, five criticisms rank considerably higher for father-in-law than mother-in-law; uncongeniality, self-righteousness, talkativeness, unconventionality, and incompetence.

TABLE 32

FATHER-IN-LAW DIFFICULTIES REPORTED BY 52 PERSONS

<i>What Father-in-Law Does That Makes Him the Most Difficult In-Law</i>	<i>Specific Criticism Named</i>	
	<i>Number</i>	<i>Per Cent</i>
1. Meddles, interferes, dominates, intrudes on our privacy, etc.	31	17.3
2. Nags, criticizes, complains, finds fault, ridicules, etc.	26	14.5
3. Resists change, disagrees on traditions, uncongenial, etc.	21	11.7
4. Ignores us, is indifferent, uninterested, aloof, not close, etc.	17	9.5
5. Is possessive, demanding, overprotective, forces attention, etc.	13	7.3
6. Is self-righteous, superior, always right, smug, bragging, etc.	13	7.3
7. Talks too much, asks useless questions, doesn't listen, etc.	13	7.3
8. Is thoughtless, inconsiderate, selfish, unappreciative, etc.	11	6.1
9. Is irresponsible, immature, childish, dependent, no life of own	8	4.5
10. Drinks, gambles, is unconventional, etc.	8	4.5
11. Does not do his own job well, incompetent, lazy, etc.	7	3.9
12. Takes sides, plays favorites, shows partiality, pampers the children, plays one of us against the other, etc.	5	2.8
13. Abuses hospitality, comes without invitation, overstays visits	4	2.2
14. Tattles, gossips, exaggerates, lies, is insincere	2	1.1
15. Is jealous, rivalrous, envious, covets what we have, etc.	0	0.0
Total	179	100.0

### The Father-in-Law Syndrome

The father-in-law syndrome that appears in these high-ranking complaints is generally in terms of ineffectuality. Father-in-law is seen to be old-fashioned, resistant to change. He is boastful and bragging, talking too much, at the same time

that he is personally incompetent and inadequate. Whereas mother-in-law is criticized for her active intrusion and interference, father-in-law offends by default, by his failure to be the kind of competent person his children-in-law can be proud to claim as their own.

In some ways father-in-law is criticized less often than mother-in-law. In some regards he offends his children-in-law more often. While in still other characteristics, both parents-in-law are found to be difficult. By combining the percentages of the various criticisms with case material from the group and individual interviews, we see some of the more frequent father-in-law difficulties as they appear to the men and women who report them.

### **Meddlesomeness in Fathers-in-Law**

The top-ranking difficulty with fathers-in-law is meddlesomeness. Some 17.3% of all the things that men and women say make father-in-law difficult have to do with his tendency to interfere, to meddle, and to dominate. This percentage is not significantly larger than others leveled at father-in-law, as it is in the case of mother-in-law. Still, it is mentioned often enough and with the kind of supporting evidence that makes it appear to be something to reckon with in father-in-law. Taking key phrases from interviews, we see some of the ways in which men and women report father-in-law interferences:

I wish he would not try to interfere in our lives. (39-year-old Kansas woman)

He dominates every situation; he interferes with rules for the children. (56-year-old Mississippi woman)

He likes to dominate his family. (33-year-old Mississippi woman)

I wish he would not try to interfere in family arguments or be too helpful. (26-year-old Chicago woman)

I wish he would mind his own business and let us mind ours. (26-year-old Illinois woman)

If only he could be somewhat less patriarchal. (34-year-old New Jersey woman)



### **Nagging in Fathers-in-Law**

Nagging in the father-in-law appears in the form of hyper-criticalness in which the children-in-law feel that he will find fault with anything they do. Complaints of nagging constitute 14.5% of all criticisms leveled at the father-in-law, a larger percentage than is found in mothers-in-law (10.9%). However, the number of mentions of nagging and criticalness in connection with the father-in-law is but 9.4% of the total number of mentions of these characteristics.

Some of the things that people say make father-in-law difficult in this area are:

He constantly criticizes his daughter-in-law for everything she does. (26-year-old New York woman)

I wish he wouldn't criticize his food in restaurants and at home. (40-year-old North Carolina woman)

Father-in-law is always picking on the children, so we have had to protect them from his constant harping by calling him "Mickey Mouse" behind his back. We tell the children, "That's just the way Mickey Mouse is," and that way they can take it. (25-year-old North Carolina woman)

A review of the cases makes it clear that there are at least three bases for father-in-law's tendency to be critical and complaining. The first is his lack of interests of his own, which makes him petulant and fault-finding around the homes of his sons- and daughters-in-law. The second seems to arise out of his own lack of self-confidence and his loss of status. A chronic defensiveness, therefore, takes the form of belittling and ego-deflating of those who are at work. The third basis for father-in-law's tendency to criticize his children's families seems to arise out of his different perspective and his resistance to change.

### **Old-Fashioned Fathers-in-Law**

The constellation of criticisms of father-in-law that includes such comments as, "He disagrees on traditions, resists change,

is intolerant of our ways, etc.” is one of being “old-fashioned.” Mentions of this type total 11.7% of all those referring to father-in-law. In this criticism, father-in-law ranks third of all in-laws, with 12.9% of the total number of mentions of the complaint. This tendency in fathers-in-law is reported by men and women:

Father-in-law is unable to adjust his ideas in accordance with the change in the times. (52-year-old New York man)

He should understand our generation and respect our authority in it; I wish he would leave out the “good old days” attitude. (33-year-old Missouri woman)

He ought to realize that different generations have different standards. (34-year-old New Jersey woman)

The composite picture appears to be one of a man who digs his heels into the places he held in his prime and refuses to budge from the ways that once were good for him. He appears to his grown children and to his children-in-law as having failed to keep up. They feel that they are leaving him farther and farther behind as they progress, and that he does nothing but harp on the “good old days” and long for the return of a life that he once knew but that is no more. He, therefore, has little in common with his married children, and tends to be intolerant of the different standards that their way of life represents.

### **The Complaint of Distance in Fathers-in-Law**

The fourth-ranking criticism in connection with father-in-law is that “he ignores us, is indifferent, uninterested, aloof, unsociable, etc.” Nearly 10% (9.5%) of all complaints of father-in-law are those of distance. Father-in-law is criticized for being distant 7.3% of all times it is mentioned as a complaint of in-laws.

One of the more articulate of the reports of father-in-law’s aloofness comes from a woman in Mississippi who says:

My most difficult in-law relationship comes from not being able to have my father-in-law understand that we love him. I wish that he would visit us more often; spend more time with his grandchildren, and let us do things for him. (33-year-old Mississippi woman)

Other men and women report of their fathers-in-law:

He just doesn't seem interested in us or in anything we do.

He seems so indifferent. I knew that he was quiet before I married, but actually he just doesn't seem to CARE.

You'd think that he would like his grandchildren. But he doesn't. He gets annoyed with them so easily that we can't stay all together for more than a little while at a time.

I don't think that he has really liked me. No matter what I do, I can't get him to accept me as a real member of the family.

These references to the inability of the father-in-law to accept his children-in-law are similar to those we found concerning the mother-in-law in Chapter 10. It is the experience of being welcomed into the family and accepted as a real member of it that so many men and women appreciate most deeply (see Chapter 6). When the parents-in-law do not appear to be interested in their married children's families, the complaint of emotional distance is accompanied by a sense of loss, a feeling of rejection, and experience of not belonging.

### **Possessive Fathers-in-Law**

Possessiveness is much less a criticism of father-in-law than it is of mother-in-law. While 14.1% of all complaints of mother-in-law are of her possessiveness, but 7.3% of the criticisms leveled at father-in-law are of his tendency to be possessive, demanding, and overprotective. Mother-in-law is connected with 76.6% of all mentions of this complaint, while father-in-law is attributed with but 5.2% of the total number of possessiveness mentions.

When father-in-law is mentioned as being possessive, it is in much the same way, but to a lesser degree, that the same and much more frequent criticisms are made of mother-in-law. Some of the ways in which men and women report difficulty with their fathers-in-law in this characteristic are:

He ought to realize that his son is no longer his alone. (26-year-old Illinois woman)

I wish he would not expect my husband to ask his advice on every little thing. (33-year-old Mississippi woman)

I just don't know what to do about my father-in-law. He tries to impose on us in every way . . . insists that we come visit him when we really can't . . . comes over to us and demands so much attention that neither of us can study . . . he's just so *demanding* all the time. (29-year-old Chicago woman)

He thinks he can cover up any disagreement with gifts and a suffocating sense of possessiveness. (56-year-old Mississippi woman)

### Self-Righteous Fathers-in-Law

"He is self-righteous, bragging, smug, knows all the answers," say men and women about their fathers-in-law. This criticism comprises 7.3% of the total complaints attributed to father-in-law. In the mother-in-law this same criticism accounted for but 3.0% of those attributed to her. Father-in-law receives 11.5% of the mentions of this characteristic among all in-laws. The vehemence with which these difficulties with father-in-law are reported gives prominence to them beyond their statistical significance. Here are some of the direct quotes:

My father-in-law acts as though, "My way is the only way." He is egotistical and constantly bragging. (23-year-old New York woman)

He's always right; couldn't *possibly* be wrong—until I could scream. (48-year-old Mississippi woman)

I know better than to argue with him, because he just *has* to be right about everything. Even if I don't say anything he keeps at me with his chronic boastfulness. (35-year-old Maine man)



I just wish he wouldn't preach all the time. (39-year-old Kansas woman)

It is quite possible that father-in-law is on the defensive and brags to cover up his own feeling of inadequacy. Regardless of the reasons for his behavior, his children-in-law find his self-righteousness extremely difficult to tolerate.

### **Talkative Fathers-in-Law**

Generally we think of women being the more talkative of the two sexes. But among in-laws, interestingly, it is the father-in-law more than the mother-in-law who is criticized for talking too much. This complaint ranks seventh among those attributed to father-in-law, while it ranks eleventh of those for mother-in-law. It constitutes 7.3% of the things that make father-in-law difficult and only 2.8% of the things that make mother-in-law difficult. Father-in-law is the referent of this criticism in 14.9% of the mentions of it for all relatives by marriage. Men even more than women find this quality of their fathers-in-law difficult. Both sexes express their annoyance over this characteristic of their fathers-in-law easily. Some examples follow:

He jabbars incessantly, repeats himself, tells the same story over and over . . . a steady stream of words. (35-year-old New York man)

If he only would quit telling the same old stories over and over again. (42-year-old Mississippi woman)

Father-in-law is my most difficult in-law because he is too talkative. He just talks all the time and is so boring. (39-year-old Los Angeles woman)

He goes on and on for hours about nothing at all, just talking, talking. . . . (32-year-old Illinois woman)

Such criticisms as these may represent annoyance over the garrulity of senility. The fact that these reports come from men and women of mature years, whose parents and parents-

in-law would be well along in years, would give some weight to this interpretation.

Another facet of the problem may be in the lack of conversational skills among men, which shows up when their work no longer absorbs their complete attention and they are thrust back upon their own resources for establishing communication with members of the larger family.

From the point of view of the younger generation, this annoyance over relatively innocuous behavior in the father-in-law may represent a form of rejection and hostility. In cases where the children-in-law like the father-in-law, there may be some recognition of his tendency to be loquacious, but the element of irritation so evident in these reports is lacking. Instead, in many instances women, especially, appreciate the way a grandfather entertains the children with his tales, and how much his reminiscing adds to the life of the household.

### **Thoughtless Fathers-in-Law**

When men and women mention what makes their father-in-law the most difficult in-law relationship, 11 out of 179 criticisms (6.1%) are that he is thoughtless, inconsiderate, selfish, unappreciative. This is about the same percentage of this complaint that is associated with mother-in-law (5.6%). Of all in-laws, father-in-law is one of those least mentioned as being thoughtless and inconsiderate, accounting for but 5.4% of all mentions of this characteristic.

Cases reveal nothing of particular interest beyond general descriptions of thoughtless behavior, especially of the "He doesn't appreciate what we do for him" variety. In comparing cases involving the mother-in-law with those in which the father-in-law figures the more prominently as difficult, it seems that much less is expected of the father-in-law than of the mother-in-law. If this is the case, then father-in-law would not be criticized as often as would the mother-in-law for thoughtlessness and inconsideration, since less is expected of him. Being less heavily freighted with adequacy expectations

in interpersonal and intrafamily relations, the father-in-law's role may therefore be less prone to criticism than is that of the mother-in-law. This is an interesting area for further research in role theory in our culture.

### **Immature Fathers-in-Law**

There are childish and irresponsible fathers-in-law. But they do not loom as large among in-law problems as do immature mothers-in-law. Immaturity ranks fifth for mothers-in-law and but ninth for fathers-in-law. Out of 179 criticisms of father-in-law, only 8 (4.5%) are on his irresponsibility and dependence. Father-in-law accounts for but 4.4% of the mentions of this characteristic among in-laws, while mother-in-law is responsible for 50.8%.

Here again may be the influence of the sex roles in our society. Mothers, tied more closely to their children, may have more difficulty in establishing interests of their own than do fathers who, being men, have been encouraged from boyhood to develop lives of their own quite apart from their families. When children grow old enough to marry and bring in-laws into the family, they find, then, that mother (or mother-in-law) often lacks interests beyond her children and clings to them for satisfaction. On the other hand, by this time father (or father-in-law) has reached his middle years and has become involved in business and community interests beyond the family that keep him from becoming quite so objectionably dependent.

### **Unconventional Fathers-in-Law**

Father-in-law gets himself "in Dutch" by drinking and gambling and carousing around at night. He accounts for more than one-third (34.8%) of all complaints of this type leveled at relatives by marriage. In comparison, mother-in-law is quite conventional, with but 8.7% of such complaints lodged at her door. Even so, it is not a large percentage of men who offend

their children-in-law with their unconventionality, for this criticism accounts for but 4.5% of those directed at father-in-law.

Those men and women who do direct their criticisms for unconventional behavior at father-in-law tend to be intolerant of him and basically rejecting in their feelings. A 41-year-old South Dakota woman says that her father-in-law is her most difficult in-law because he "drinks, stays out late, or all night, is not considerate of his wife, and has low moral standards." She goes on to elaborate that she wants nothing to do with such a low character, and that she forbids him to have any contact with her children.

A man in New England reports that he has always been ashamed of his father-in-law because of his drinking. "He becomes obnoxious when he's had too much . . . he almost fell over the last time we visited there. It's bad enough with my wife and myself there but in front of our children it's awful. He usually drinks in a holiday spirit, so it's worse when we come, I guess, for that is an occasion! His wife is embarrassed for him, but she gives a nervous laugh and steers him off to bed. . . ."

Longitudinal studies might reveal which came first—the drinking or the alienation within the family. Certainly unconventional behavior of any kind tends to make things difficult for members of the family. It is quite possible, however, that in some cases it is a symptom of distress either from some pressure within the personality or from strains within the personal relationships of the family. Grandmother used to observe that such and such a family had "driven the poor man to drink." From what the alcohol studies reveal to date, it's quite possible that she may have been correct in some cases.

Finally, this unseemly behavior may be an expression of immaturity in father-in-law. As Edward Strecker puts the point in *Their Mothers' Sons*, the man may be after "Mom in a Bottle." Infidelity, gambling, and general "carousing" have similar bases in immaturity and insecurity.



### **Incompetent Fathers-in-Law**

Men tend to criticize their fathers-in-law for incompetency. Six of the seven mentions of "He does not do his own job well, he is lazy, incompetent, etc." came from men. Had women been more sensitive to this quality in father-in-law, it might have ranked much higher than the eleventh place it holds, since women outnumber men in this phase of the study and are prone to mention more criticisms of their in-laws than are men.

This complaint accounts for 3.9% of all those leveled at father-in-law. Father-in-law receives 7.2% of all mentions of this trait. Therefore, except for the fact that men so much more than women tend to use this complaint in mentioning the things that make father-in-law the most difficult of in-laws, the factor is not particularly revealing.

One observation is pertinent; that is, that men more than women tend to be criticized by their relatives by marriage for overt behavior (laziness, drinking, talkativeness, etc.), while women more than men are susceptible to the criticisms that arise out of the ways in which they relate themselves to others (intrusion, possessiveness, nagging, etc.). These differences in the kinds of complaints lodged against in-laws of the two sexes have their origins apparently in the sex roles ascribed to men and women in our society. The next factor to be discussed further illustrates the point.

### **Partiality in Fathers-in-Law**

The quality that shows up as pampering in mother-in-law is called partiality in the father-in-law. Where the mother-in-law is criticized for "making over and spoiling the grandchildren by pampering them," the father-in-law is said to offend by showing favoritism and playing up one against the other in the family. This quality ranks eighth for mother-in-law and twelfth for father-in-law, with percentages of the complaints for each 5.3% and 2.8% respectively.

Partiality is more characteristic of mother-in-law than of father-in-law. As noted above, mother-in-law is more often criticized for the ways in which she relates herself to members of the family. So, it is not surprising to find this criticism relatively infrequent (4.9%) among those attributed to father-in-law.

### **Intruding Fathers-in-Law**

Fathers-in-law are not often criticized for abusing hospitality, coming to visit his children-in-law without invitation, overstaying visits, and failing to reciprocate in entertaining. Out of 179 things that are mentioned as making father-in-law the most difficult in-law relationship, only 4 (2.2%) are of this complaint. In comparison with mother-in-law, who receives 63.7% of all the criticisms of this sort, father-in-law receives but 4.4%.

Those few fathers-in-law who are mentioned as difficult in this respect are said to turn up unexpectedly and stay longer than the family finds comfortable. They are not criticized for failing to reciprocate in entertaining, as mother-in-law frequently is, probably for the reason that in our country women are expected to carry the responsibility of family entertaining more than men.

In general, fathers-in-law are rarely found to be difficult because of intrusion upon the young family. Those few who do prove to be annoying in this respect tend to be those who have little else to do, and who drop in on their children's family as a way of taking up time.

### **Fathers-in-Law Rarely Gossip**

Gossiping is not a complaint that is frequently attributed to fathers-in-law. Where mother-in-law is criticized as tattling, gossiping, misrepresenting facts, exaggerating, lying, being insincere and deceitful, with 33.7% of all mentions of this category, father-in-law is so mentioned only twice, with but 2.2% of the total number of criticisms.

This is interesting, especially since we have already seen earlier in this chapter that it is father-in-law more often than mother-in-law who is criticized as being overly talkative. The explanation that comes first to mind is that although father-in-law is loquacious, telling the same stories over and over again, asking useless questions, and not listening when others converse, he is not considered malicious in his chatter, as are female relatives by marriage. This again reflects the tendency of women more frequently than men to be mentioned for their inadequacies in interpersonal relations. It may indicate too that men, being busier with their business and community pursuits, are less apt to become "busybodies" and to find their satisfactions in talking about their relatives in hurtful ways.

### **Fathers-in-Law Are Not Jealous**

Father-in-law is not jealous, rivalrous, envious, or covetous, according to the men and women who participated in this study. Not once was this type of criticism mentioned in connection with a father-in-law. Mother-in-law received 34.7% of these complaints; sister-in-law received 50.5%; and daughter-in-law, another 7.4%. These three female relatives by marriage together account for 92.6% of all criticisms of jealousy. This indicates clearly that it is the woman's side of the house that most frequently offends by being jealous, envious, and rivalrous. Men rarely are mentioned as having this characteristic; fathers-in-law not at all in these data. Again, perhaps it is because men in our culture have lives of their own with other interests beyond the family, while women, being tied to their families by cultural expectations and biological necessity at least early in the family life cycle, are less likely to fulfill themselves as mature persons and so are more prone to make life difficult for their married children.

### **When Father-in-Law Is Difficult (Summary)**

Father-in-law is less difficult than mother-in-law. He is criticized much less often for being possessive, immature, partial,

and intruding—qualities that are related to the mother-in-law syndrome discussed in Chapter 10.

Criticisms ranking higher for father-in-law than for mother-in-law are: uncongeniality (or resistance to change), self-righteousness, talkativeness, unconventionality (drinking, gambling, infidelity), and incompetence. The father-in-law syndrome combining these high-ranking characteristics is one of ineffectuality.

The father-in-law offends more often than the mother-in-law with his annoying overt behavior, such as boastfulness, overtalkativeness, and drinking; and less often in his interpersonal relations in the family. These tendencies probably reflect the differences in the roles and statuses of men and women in our culture.

Father-in-law is more often mentioned as being old-fashioned and resistant to change than is mother-in-law. This may be because of his vested interests in life as he knew it in his prime. If so, it also accounts for his boastfulness and his criticalness of his married children's behavior at points where it differs from his.

Further research may clarify some of these points, and throw light on such questions as:

1. In this study father-in-law is accused of being old-fashioned and resistant to change more often than is mother-in-law. Is this a general difference between older members of both sexes? Or, does father-in-law try to put more of his ideas into effect in authoritarian ways than does his female counterpart?
2. Why is it that men are more frequently criticized for their personal indiscretions than for poor interfamily relationships? Is this a reflection of the roles and statuses of men in our culture?
3. Is the father-in-law syndrome of ineffectuality as revealed here a helpful concept?
4. Why is talkativeness a more frequent complaint of fathers-in-law than of mothers-in-law? Is this an indi-



cation of the garrulity of senility in men? Or, is something more than the age factor operating here? Can it be that men are not as skillful in maintaining communication on a mutually satisfying basis with members of their families, and so offend by clumsy efforts at conversation? Or?

5. How many of the criticisms of fathers-in-law are problems arising out of his retirement and its subsequent adjustments, and how many from his role as a father-in-law per se? Would the percentages of the various father-in-law complaints be greatly altered by keeping the various ages and stages of father-in-lawhood in view?
6. What ethnic, nationality, religious, and cultural differences might turn up in a cross-cultural study of in-law roles? For instance, would father-in-law's tendencies to be self-righteous and superior be less conflictful in families accustomed to male domination and authoritarian controls?

#### REFERENCE SOURCE

1. Osbert Burdett, *The Brownings*. London: Lowe and Brydone Printers, Ltd., 1936, p. 39.

## All In-Laws Are Difficult at Times

HE WAS STATIONED at Great Lakes. She was living with the children at her parents' home in Michigan. Their separation was not easy for either of them, and he called home every week to talk with her—just to hear the sound of her voice, he said. One night her voice was heavy with tears as she begged:

"Try to find a place near you for the children and me. I can't stand this living with in-laws any more!"

Touched and baffled, he replied:

"What in-laws are you talking about? You're living with your own folks, aren't you?"

Her response was a poignant—

"Everybody's in-laws when you're married."

That young wife put her finger on a sore point in the relationships of the married couple and either set of parents. Once a man and woman marry, they are faced with the challenge of identifying with each other. This means making new loyalties in which they both come first in each other's eyes. It necessarily involves breaking away from both sets of parents. Old identifications with the members of both families now must undergo a change to the place where "everybody is an in-law when you are married."

But old loyalties and responsibilities carry on in the lives of both the husband and the wife. They still are adult children of the parents who knew them when . . . They still are and want to be part of the families they came from and married into. At the same time, their own new family unit must and should come first. A case illustrates the struggle of conflicting loyalties:

Ann and Bill were married while he was stationed at the Air Base in Florida. She continued on with her job near the base, while he was in training, and they spent every minute they both could find just being with each other. Their first Thanksgiving was a crazy, jolly affair, in which he ditched the turkey and all the fixings at the base, and joined her and two other couples they enjoyed at a funny little dump of a place down the road. It wasn't much of a meal, but they loved it, and holding hands on the way back reassured each other that there was nothing like being married.

Then he was discharged and by the next November they were back in the town they both had originally come from. They found a nice little place to call their own, not too close to either family, and before they knew it, they both felt really settled down at last. And then their first big argument arose. . . .

It shouldn't have been so hard, but it was. The question was where they would spend Thanksgiving Day. His mother has been widowed while he was in service, and was home alone with his teen-age brother. She was wistfully eager to have Bill and his wife have Thanksgiving Day with her, sort of expected them to come, to the place where Bill felt that he just had to.

Ann's family, on the other hand, took it for granted that of course Ann would bring her new husband back "home" for the family reunion the family always enjoyed at holiday time. All three of her older sisters came home then with their husbands and children. It was naturally assumed that of course Ann would too. And, Ann wanted to. She had looked forward to the time when she too could return home a woman in her own right with her husband by her side, as her sisters had done through the years. She didn't want to go to Bill's home for a dull, dreary time with only his mother and kid brother around the table with them. She wanted to have her Bill and herself in the center of the big happy family get-together at her home.

Ann suggested that they solve the problem by inviting Bill's mother and brother over with them to her family's Thanksgiving Day dinner. But Bill would hear none of that. His mother, he felt, had a right

to have her Thanksgiving in her own home with her children around her, and especially now that she was widowed it was his responsibility, wasn't it?

The problem still was not solved when suddenly a week before Thanksgiving Day, a wire came from the firm that Bill had hoped to get a place with, asking if Bill and Ann could come on for a series of exploratory interviews over Thanksgiving week end. Of course they went, thereby postponing the question as to whose family they belonged to at holiday time.

Not every couple is as fortunate as to be saved by a wire from a prospective boss. Nor is the problem over for Bill and Ann; for there are all the other holidays throughout their life together, yet to come. They will come home for Thanksgiving Day some other year—but to which home? And where will they spend Christmas? And summer vacations—whose home will be home to them then?

When a man marries he may try to tell himself that he is not marrying her family, he is marrying the girl. But let the first holiday come along, or the first baby, and he will find out whom he married. As will his wife. The marriage of the two people unites the two families from which they both have come, as inexorably as it binds the couple.

Every married couple belongs to three families. They belong first of all to themselves. They are the WE of the new family they are founding together. But, at the same time they belong also to *his* family, and to *hers*. If they are to establish a strong family unit of their own, they must inevitably realign their loyalties to the place where *our* family comes before either *yours* or *mine*.

This is the elemental triangle of married living. Unless the cohesive force in the new family unit is stronger than that which ties either of the couple to the parental home, the founding family is threatened, as we see in the figures.

In Figure 1a, "YOU" have in-law trouble because "MY" family is too close. It may be because I am still immature and not ready to emancipate myself from my parental home. It may be that one or more members of my family is possessive and finds it difficult to let me go. It may be that circum-



"MY" family too close

"YOUR" family too close

"OUR" family comes first

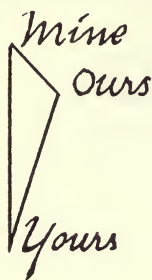


Fig. 1A

"YOU" have in-law trouble

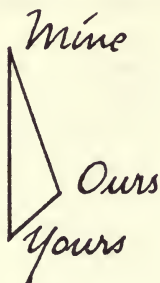


Fig. 1B

"I" have in-law trouble

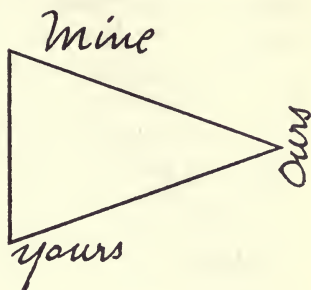


Fig. 1C

No in-law trouble

stances within my family require from me more loyalty and attention than I can comfortably give at the time that I am involved in building my own home and marriage. Whatever the reason, if the forces pulling me/us toward loyalties to "MY" home are too strong, the development of "OUR" common sense of identity is delayed or weakened.

In Figure 1b, "YOUR" family is too close, and so "I" have in-law trouble. Because "YOU" are bound so tightly to "YOUR" family, I am pulled away from mine, and "WE" make little progress in establishing "OURS."

In Figure 1c, "OUR" family unit comes first in our joint loyalties. We are threatened neither by the ties that bind us to "YOUR" family, nor by the bonds that unite us to "MINE." We are able to make progress as a new family because the force of our common identification pulls us out and away together into a home of our own. Now we can share in the common heritage of both your family and mine because we are not threatened by the pull from either. Only thus are WE free to enjoy being members of the entire extended family, without the stress of in-law strains.

The basic task in the early years of marriage is to cement the marriage bonds to the place where the two feel, behave, and fundamentally *want to be ONE*. This is the explicit

commitment of the marriage ceremony in which the man and wife promise, "Forsaking all others, keep Ye only to him/her as long as Ye both shall live."

Any intrusion or threat from either his family or hers may be considered an in-law problem. The autonomy of the married pair is so imperative for the solidity of the union that there is a peculiar sensitivity to any conflicting force emanating from either parental home. For this reason, anything that a member of his family or hers does that imperils the independence of the pair may be construed as an in-law difficulty.

Any member of the extended family of either of the married pair may be seen as the "most difficult in-law." Although members of the primary family are most often mentioned as troublesome: mothers-in-law, sisters-in-law, brothers-in-law,

TABLE 33

## DIFFICULTIES WITH IN-LAWS OUTSIDE THE IMMEDIATE FAMILY

<i>What Other In-Laws Do That Makes Them Difficult</i>	<i>Specific Criticism Named Number Per Cent</i>	
1. Meddles, interferes, dominates, is bossy, noseey, etc.	21	31.9
2. Nags, criticizes, complains, blames, finds fault, etc.	10	15.2
3. Lies, is insincere, tattles, makes trouble, gossips, etc.	7	10.6
4. Abuses hospitality, overstays welcome, comes uninvited	6	9.1
5. Is immature, childish, is dependent, has few outside interests	6	9.1
6. Is thoughtless, inconsiderate, selfish, unappreciative	4	6.1
7. Is demanding, possessive, overprotective	3	4.5
8. Takes sides, plays favorites, shows partiality, pampers, etc.	2	3.0
9. Is jealous, rivalrous, covetous, envious	2	3.0
10. Has different standards and resists change	2	3.0
11. Is indifferent, aloof, uninterested, does not accept me/us	2	3.0
12. Does not do own job well	1	1.5
Total	66	100.0

fathers-in-law, in that order, other in-laws more remotely related can be considered difficult also. The group interview phase of this study turns up for investigation 66 mentions of trouble with such other in-laws as aunts-in-law, grandmothers-in-law, cousins-in-law, and "all-in-laws."

As with closer relatives by marriage, the other-in-law criticisms are more frequent for women than for men relatives. Out of 24 "other-in-laws" mentioned as most difficult, 10 were aunts-in-law, 7 were grandmothers-in-law, 4 were cousins-in-law, 2 were nieces-in-law, and 1 was a nephew-in-law. These in-law complaints came entirely from female members, with not one male criticizing his more distant relatives by marriage. More older than younger members of the extended families are mentioned as difficult. In general, these reported difficulties with other in-laws follow the same basic patterns of complaints that hold for in-law relationships as a whole.

### **Meddlesome, Critical Other In-Laws**

Meddling and nagging rank first among criticisms made of in-laws outside the immediate family (grandmothers-in-law, aunts-in-law, nieces-in-law, cousins-in-law, etc.). These complaints are similar to those lodged against closer relatives by marriage. An aunt-in-law is troublesome because she "interferes in discipline, takes exception to our forms of discipline and recreation, and criticizes parents to the children." A grandmother-in-law who raised one woman's husband is seen as "the typical mother-in-law—meddling, interfering, nagging, and perennially bossy." Another is found meddlesome because she "gives unwanted advice and is always planning things for you." These two top-ranking categories of criticisms total 47.1% of all complaints attributed to other in-laws.

### **Tattling Relatives by Marriage**

Gossiping, carrying tales, and exaggerating stories in order to make trouble in the family is reported largely as a problem

among peers and younger in-laws. The one nephew-in-law reported to be a problem is seen to be prone to lying and deceit. A 64-year-old woman reports that her cousin-in-law "carries stories, enlarges on stories, and makes trouble for me." Such criticisms are seen to parallel those characteristic of siblings-in-law. Since they are most common among members of the same generation, they may be seen to be extensions of sibling rivalry and tension.

### **Intruding, Immature Other In-Laws**

The dozen complaints of this type can be illustrated by a single case that contains many of the elements found within these two categories of difficulties with secondary relatives by marriage:

Kay married six years ago. When Charley took her home to his family to live, she found that she had not only married him, but the family business as well. For, he worked with his father and grandfather in the gas station at the intersection that had grown into a \$50,000 business through the twenty years that the two older men had put into it.

For a while Kay and Charley tried to live with his folks, but they all soon found that three families under one roof were too many, so the young couple built a commodious house for themselves up on the hill where they could be by themselves and have plenty of space in which to raise their family.

Came the first baby, and with her, in-law problems burst all over the place. Now that Kay was tied down with the baby, and spent her time in the big airy house on the hill, there was no reason why she could not also take care of Grandpa while he recovered from his broken hip. Kay felt uneasy about having him brought to her home from the hospital, but she kept quiet, because it only seemed fair that she take on the responsibility of nursing him while the other adults were busy with the business on the highway.

But now, Kay realizes that she should have spoken up in protest against being responsible for her grandfather-in-law. For she developed an "allergy to grandparents" early in her childhood.

She remembers how awful it was having her own petulant grandmother in her home while she was growing up—how she never could have children in to play because it would bother grandmother—how she had to carry up the old lady's meals and cater to her wishes,



and never be appreciated for a single thing that you did for her—how it was all so very disagreeable that the most severe punishment she suffered as a girl was to be told, “Now, don’t act like your grandmother.” This went on for years, until her sixteenth birthday, when suddenly the old grandmother died. Kay remembers her father commenting as he locked the door after her funeral that this was the very first time he had ever been able to leave home.

And now, Kay is in the same spot. She could get away once in a while if it weren’t for her grandfather-in-law. She could get a sitter for the baby, but not for a bedridden, cranky old man. Kay realizes that she loses patience with him more than she would if it weren’t for her childhood conditioning against invalid grandparents in the home. But she is at her wits end, and says, “I hate to admit it, but I’m letting my in-laws break up my home.”

The one alleviating factor in Kay’s in-law problem is that her grandfather-in-law is not necessarily a chronic burden on Kay. Once his hip is healed, he may be expected to go down the hill and take up his place in the family business where he left it when the accident disabled him. Not so with some other family situations. A 27-year-old Indiana woman complains that her grandparents:

... are too dependent on their in-laws for everything. They should make their lives so interesting their children would *want* to go to see them. Instead, they try to force their attention on their grandchildren, until I for one can hardly stand it. My husband says his grandparents-in-law are the worst in-laws he’s ever seen. . . .

Intruding, dependent in-laws are not always members of the grandparent generation. Occasionally one finds an irresponsible, immature younger relative by marriage who becomes a nuisance for the family. One 40-year-old New Jersey woman reports that it is her niece-in-law who is her greatest in-law problem. The girl wants to borrow money so frequently that it is embarrassing and annoying to the whole family. She comes for too many visits, and overstays her welcome until the family floats the loan she is after just to be free of her once more. And then, in a few weeks or months, there she is back again as big as life . . .

And so the complaints continue for other in-laws as for



closer relatives by marriage. The common denominator seems to be that relatives by definition are free to impose or to annoy, just because they do belong to the family. There is a sense in which most men and women do what they can to keep peace in the family, and so they do not speak up to protect their own interests as they might at the provocation of a stranger. Just because in-laws are the mate's relatives, there is a tendency to bend over backwards being "nice," until the situation becomes well-nigh intolerable. Then comes an emotional explosion with in-law troubles at the center.

### **Family Origins of In-Law Problems**

Many in-law difficulties tend to arise out of early family strains and stresses in one or both members of the pair. These childhood conditionings are a potent influence in the marriage adjustment, as we saw in the case of Kay above. Another case illustrating the latent in-law trouble that is inherent in one man's family suggests the inevitability of future in-law conflict for his wife and himself:

Paul, 22, graduated from college last June, and now is looking for his first position. His family is quite insistent that he get a job back in his home town where he can live with or close by his relatives. He went back to look over an opening there, but found that he had difficulty in breathing all the time he was home. He complains that he always has attacks of asthma when he goes back, and that he literally feels that he is being suffocated when his mother's family cluster about him. Nothing doctors can do alleviates the symptoms or lessens his feeling that "they are pushing in on him."

He describes his mother as the natural head of the family from which she came, with all five of her younger sisters clustering around her. One by one they all married and settled close to this older sister who continues to hold their first loyalty. Paul feels that more than anything else, it was his mother's hold on these younger sisters that was ultimately responsible for the divorces of two of them, the separation of a third, and the extreme jealousy of the husband of the fourth. The fifth sister's husband is sarcastic about Paul's family and never misses a chance to "do dirt or say something mean."

Paul, as his mother's only son, has been the pampered darling of all five aunts, as well as his mother. They have hovered over him as long as he can remember. Even when he left on the train for college four years ago, they came to the station and wept so everyone could see them, six grown women all in a row, because he was leaving home. It was that very day when the train carried him farther and farther away that he first felt relief from his asthma. It bothered him rarely at college, and then usually when a letter came from home, or one of his doting aunts came to visit him, or when his mother ordered him home for a week end. And, now that he feels the pressure upon him to return to the smothering devotion of the five aunts and his mother, his nose closes up again and he can't breathe except in labored gasps.

Little Mary to whom he is engaged can talk him out of his asthma in short order . . . mostly by assuring him that he does not have to go back under the female domination of his mother and her sisters again. She refuses to have anything to do with these, her future aunts-in-law, and insists that he choose between them and her.

If Paul can identify closely enough with Mary, he may break the bonds that have tied him so close to home and be able to breathe again. In order to help him, Mary will have to continue the complete rejection of his folks that she has initiated. Only when Paul is completely emancipated from the morbid attachment of his mother and his aunts will it be safe for this young modern girl of his to relax her repudiation of her in-laws. Even then it may not work, but Mary feels that it is worth a try, and so she remains hostile to all her in-laws.

Thus, we see that especially for young couples involved in establishing their own autonomy, any relative by marriage, or by blood, who threatens their independence may be difficult for them. Some few men mention "all-in-laws" as troublesome. More women than men report difficulties with their various relatives by marriage. And more women in-laws are found troublesome than male relatives by marriage, both among distant and close relatives. Members of the parents' and the grandparents' generations are criticized more often than are young people, possibly because of the urgency of the establishment of autonomy among young adults.

## How In-Laws Make Trouble

When 1,337 men and women were asked to indicate the in-law relationship that in their experience had proved to be the most difficult and then to report what had made these in-law contacts troublesome, some 2,611 complaints were mentioned. The first-ranking criticisms of all in-law relationships combined were meddlesomeness, interference, domination, etc. More than one out of five (22.6%) of all complaints were of this kind. This is a significantly larger percentage than of any other category of complaints (significant at the one per cent level). The in-laws most frequently mentioned as most difficult (mother-in-law and sister-in-law) both had this as their top-ranking criticism.

The totals of all criticisms made of all relatives by marriage summarize the in-law problem in order of frequency of complaints reported by all participants in the group interview phase of the study. Table 31 lists all difficulties reported of all in-laws in rank order of their frequency.

Several constellations appear in the rank order of in-law difficulties in Table 34. The first is what we have called the mother-in-law syndrome, consisting largely of the first three items in the rank order: meddling, possessiveness, and nagging. This combination of complaints is characteristic of those made of the mother-in-law. It is found also in the criticisms of some fathers-in-law, sisters-in-law, and other female in-laws, in which cases it appears to be an elaboration of the identification with the mother of her husband, older daughter, or sister. This impression merits further exploration in research..

The complaint of distance is at the other pole of the in-law problem and is concerned with problems involved in becoming accepted as a member of the spouse's family. It includes items 4 and 5 in the rank order (Table 34), covering criticisms of indifference and thoughtlessness. These problems are mentioned in 16.8% of all criticisms made of in-laws generally and are usually attributed to mother-in-law, sister-in-

TABLE 34

ALL DIFFICULTIES WITH IN-LAWS REPORTED BY 1,337 PERSONS

<i>What In-Laws Do That Makes Them Difficult</i>	<i>Specific Criticism Named</i>	
	<i>Number</i>	<i>Per Cent</i>
1. Meddles, interferes, dominates, etc.	589	22.6
2. Nags, criticizes, complains, finds fault, ridicules, etc.	276	10.5
3. Is possessive, demanding, overprotective, forces attention, etc.	252	9.6
4. Ignores us, is indifferent, uninterested, aloof, etc.	232	8.9
5. Is thoughtless, inconsiderate, selfish, unappreciative, etc.	206	7.9
6. Clings, is immature, childish, dependent, no life of own, etc.	183	7.2
7. Disagrees on traditions, has different standards, resists change, intolerant of our ways, nothing in common, etc.	163	6.2
8. Is self-righteous, superior, always right, egotistical, etc.	113	4.3
9. Takes sides, plays favorites, shows partiality, spoils, etc.	103	3.9
10. Tattles, gossips, misrepresents facts, exaggerates, lies, is dishonest, insincere, deceitful, etc.	101	3.9
11. Does not do own job well, is incompetent, etc.	97	3.7
12. Is jealous, rivalrous, envious, covets what we have, etc.	95	3.6
13. Abuses hospitality, comes without invitation, overstays visits, does not reciprocate, etc.	91	3.5
14. Talks too much, asks useless questions, doesn't listen, etc.	87	3.3
15. Is unconventional, drinks, gambles, is unfaithful, etc.	23	0.9
Total	2,611	100.0

law, or daughter-in-law, the females of the family most responsible for developing close interpersonal and intrafamily relationships.

The sibling syndrome consists of such complaints as self-righteousness, incompetency, playing favorites, gossiping, and jealousy. This combination of problems totals 19.4% of all reported. It appears to arise out of the competitiveness of



brothers and sisters and to have its origin back in early sibling rivalry patterns within the parental family.

Male relatives by marriage more than the women of the family are criticized as being unconventional, drinking, gambling, etc., probably because of their greater freedom of opportunity within the double standard of morality for the sexes.

Being "old-fashioned" in terms of disagreeing on traditions, resisting change, and being uncongenial is a criticism that children-in-law make of their parents-in-law. Since it is not reciprocal, it probably represents the emancipatory thrust of the younger generation to establish themselves in their own way of life by repudiating the old to which their parents and parents-in-law, and less often siblings-in-law, still cling. It is interesting that parents-in-law do not complain that their children-in-law are "new-fashioned." But rather in their reporting of uncongeniality, parents-in-law seem to wish that their children's families would accept them rather than label them "old-fashioned."

The few criticisms of the younger generation in comparison with the high frequencies of criticisms of parents-in-law indicates not only that older persons are more culpable but also that younger men and women are more critical. This is borne out in the softened spirit of criticism typical of these made of children-in-law by older men and women. Two bases for this are seen. First, the urge for autonomy demands sharp cutting of the apron strings on the part of many young people if they are to establish themselves independently. Second is the taboo against speaking critically of family members that restrains older men and women to a greater degree than is apparent among the younger.

### **Let the Rest of the World Go By (Summary)**

"With someone like you," so the popular song goes, "a pal good and true, I'd like to leave it all behind, and go and find, some place that's known to God alone—just a spot to call

our own. We'll find perfect peace, where joys never cease—out there beneath the kindly sky. We'll build a sweet little nest, somewhere in the West—and let the rest of the world go by."

This might well be the theme song of those who would escape the intrusion of the world. It is close to the heart of the in-law situation; for what these young lovers are saying is, "Let's give ourselves a chance to settle down and make our own home, far from the possibilities of intruding in-laws, meddling relatives, and the family responsibilities, loyalties, and conditionings that both of us have."

Everybody is "in-laws" when you are married. The big task of marriage is to develop the mutual loyalty that makes **OUR** family come before either **YOURS** or **MINE**.

Some in-law problems have their bases in the family history or the early development of the man or the woman, which, carrying over into marriage, may make that person vulnerable to certain types of in-law problems, or "allergic" to in-laws.

Any member of either family who threatens the autonomy of the couple or delays the independence of the pair is in danger of being a difficult in-law. So we find aunts-in-law, grandparents-in-law, nieces-in-law, cousins-in-law, as well as closer relatives by marriage being reported as troublesome. Criticisms of these other in-laws follow the same general pattern as those for all in-laws.

Apparent in the constellations of complaints about in-laws is the mother-in-law syndrome of meddlesomeness, possessiveness, and nagging; the complaint of distance, including mentions of thoughtlessness and indifference; the sibling syndrome of self-righteousness, incompetency, playing favorites, gossiping, and jealousy; and the father-in-law syndrome of ineffectuality, unconventionality, talkativeness, and incompetence.

Women more than men are involved in in-law problems, possibly because of the role assignment to the women of the family of close interpersonal and intrafamily relationships. Older family members are criticized more frequently than

are younger for two apparent reasons: (1) the emancipatory thrust of youth that makes them more critical of older family members than vice versa; and (2) the traditional taboo on discussing family matters outside the family that restrains more older than younger persons.

## What In-Law Problems Mean

**WE** AMERICANS have mixed feelings about our relatives by marriage. Thousands of us express our appreciation for them in no uncertain terms. We rise in large numbers to salute our mothers-in-law as wonderful people, as indispensable in family living, as splendid grandmothers and helpful in all they do for us.

Yet, when given an opportunity, multitudes of us report our difficulties with our in-laws. It is not hard for us to name those we find most troublesome and to detail thousands of reasons why we find our in-laws a problem.

We individually confess some considerable ambivalence about our in-laws. Sometimes we love them, appreciate them, realize how much they mean to us. And sometimes we can hardly stand living in the same family with them. We want to be accepted by them, and to feel that we really belong to the entire family into which we married. Yet it is not easy for us to accept them as they are without a good many criticisms and complaints.

Many of us feel that the mother-in-law stereotype of hostility and avoidance is unfair and unjustified in our experience. Hundreds of us stand up to be counted as those who renounce the mother-in-law mythology in our society. Yet, as a people, we really believe that the way to get along with our in-laws is to keep as far away as possible.



We are caught on the horns of the dilemma of expressing ourselves freely on these matters. On the one hand is the strong impulse to keep our family matters to ourselves and not discuss our relatives outside the family. On the other is the cultural expectation that the subject is discussed by saying something derogatory and telling some humorous tale deriding mothers-in-law.

Younger members of the family, who are most eager to be accepted in the family into which they have married, are also most critical of the members of that family. But members of the parents' and grandparents' generation, most often assailed, have least to say in complaint of the younger in-laws in the family.

It is women who are most appreciative of their relatives by marriage, and who are also most critical of them. Men, on the contrary, have relatively less to say both in commendation and in criticism of their wives' families.

These contradictions are universal among us. What they mean and where they come from and what we may do about them are the basic questions we turn to now.

### **Ambivalence Is in the Nature of Family Life**

Whom we love, we hate—at times. In any close relationship there is a need for distance from time to time. It is only those we love who can hurt us deeply. Because we love them, we expose ourselves to the pain and the problems of involvement. Strangers and those outside the family generally can do and say things that can be shrugged off with only minor annoyance, things which in the family are felt much more sharply.

Mixed feelings are to be expected in family life. Just because family members belong to us and we to them, we expect more of each other and more often are disappointed in those expectations than is true of our more casual contacts. As we relate ourselves to family members we share not only our joys and successes with each other, but also the sorrows and failures of each.

Our in-laws are in a particularly peculiar relationship to us. They are members of the family. But they come into intimate relationships with us, full-grown and unknown. By the time we are old enough to marry, we have developed patterns of communication and acceptance within our childhood family. But our in-laws usually come to us without benefit of much previous acquaintance and with few of the time-established modes of accommodation between us. We know little of what to expect of them, nor they of us. Yet upon marriage we are thrown into close family contact with this other side of the family and have only our previous experiences and "sets" to guide us.

Some of our mixed feelings about those who mean most to us come from within ourselves. We want to be accepted. We long to belong. We desire the close warm family ties that make us truly a big happy family. Yet, at the same time, we must feel that we are ourselves first of all, without threat of domination, subordination, or impingement of others' ideals, values, or ways of life. This struggle in ourselves of simultaneously attaining a sense of self and a sense of belonging is reflected in our relationships within the family.

We want to be accepted as a member of the family. But at the same time we demand that we have a right to be ourselves, to make our own decisions, and live our own lives. This basic conflict within us is lifelong. But it is central in early marriage adjustment when we are involved in shifting our identifications and realigning our loyalties.

### **Identifications Shift at Marriage**

For twenty years, more or less, a girl is identified with her childhood family. She is known as their girl. She carries their name. She thinks of herself as a member of that family. Her loyalties are to them. Her sense of who she is, is in terms of who they are, where they live, what they do, how they look at life.

Then she marries, and must evolve a new set of identifica-

tions. She changes her name. But more than that, she changes her sense of who she is and to whom she belongs. She is no longer her parents' little girl. She is now her husband's wife. Where once her loyalties were to her father and mother and to their way of life, now her loyalties must shift to center in those held in common with her husband.

This is necessarily a difficult assignment in even the best of situations. Sometimes it is almost shattering, as Paulette discovered in the following case:

Paulette grew up close to her big burly father who was her girlhood idol. She remembers even as a little girl, sitting on his lap and hearing him tell about his experiences in the war, and being allowed to stroke his medals with her fingers. He used to take her with him to some of the meetings of the veterans' organizations he was active in. One time she rode with him in a flag-bedecked car in an American Legion parade. This was all while she was a little girl.

When Paulette went to high school she began to question some of her father's enthusiasms and to refuse to go with him to the ladies' nights at Legion Hall. One big influence in her repudiation of her father's loyalties was Reverend Swanson, a confirmed pacifist who had a strong following among the teen-age young people of the community.

Paulette was strongly attracted to Reverend Swanson, largely because he was so different from her father. Where her father dominated everyone he came into contact with, Mr. Swanson made a point of standing back and letting others come to their own decisions. This appealed to Paulette, who for some time had been trying to get out from under her father's forceful domination.

The time came when Paulette and her father had a terrific fight over Mr. Swanson, and Paulette did not speak to her father for several weeks. During that time she began going out with Erwin, Mr. Swanson's older son, a boy much like his dad, a conscientious objector and a quiet unobtrusive person. Paulette's father ridiculed the boy openly and drove him straight into Paulette's arms. They ran off to be married one week end and the next Monday Erwin left for work at the local aircraft plant.

Erwin worked less than a week at the plant because he refused to sign the loyalty oath required of all employees. So he and Paulette returned to her home to live until he could find another position. Paulette's father was vehement in his derision of the boy's inability to support a wife. By now, Paulette herself found it hard to side with Erwin in these one-sided battles with her father. She began to feel

that perhaps her father was right after all, and that any man who could not support his family and would not fight to protect his country was not much of a man.

As Paulette sees it now, she never really loved Erwin, but rather used him and his father as aids to emancipate herself from her dominating dad. It didn't work. She can't give Erwin her first loyalty. But she can't go back to her little girl devotion to her father either. She says, soberly, "I guess I'm just not ready yet to be a married woman."

In this case, it was not possible for the woman to free herself from her father and to give her first loyalty to her husband. She was unable to shift her early identification with her father over to her husband, for a number of reasons. She was still in the midst of her declaration of independence from her father's influence, and married in repudiation of him and his way of life before she had developed her own autonomy. Her husband appeared weak and ineffectual, and by comparison her father was strong and competent. So she vacillated between the two, not able to completely cut herself off from her father nor to identify fully with her husband. The marriage failed because of the incomplete shift in identification of the wife from her father to her husband.

Not all girls find it as difficult to realign their loyalties as did Paulette. But every man or woman brings a complex network of earlier identifications into marriage. These former ties are sometimes entangling and binding. Whether they continue on after marriage or are repudiated in whole or in part, they still exert a significant influence upon intimate relationships both old and new.

Marriage adjustment involves the sorting out of older loyalties and developing new patterns of identification. These consist not only of practices and ways of living, but most basically of concepts of self. As we marry, we must re-examine our sense of self, and rediscover what it means to be a wife, a mother, a husband, a father. These concepts have been in the process of building throughout our early experience with ourselves and with others.

By the time we marry we have a vast miscellany of con-



cepts and pictures in our heads of the way things should be and how we should conceive of ourselves. The more powerful of these conceptions of role have come out of former identifications with those important to us—father, mother, siblings, and the other special people of childhood and youth. Some of these ways of life, picked up in our association and identification with those close to us, carry over unchallenged through the rest of life, as do language patterns and personal hygiene and table manners for most of us. But some of these earlier identifications must undergo extreme shifts as the new sense of self as husband or wife develops.

The implications of shifting identifications from the childhood home to the extended family that comes into being at marriage are many. The bibliography on identification (pages 373–389) offers further references for those interested in pursuing its ramifications. At the moment, one more question is pertinent.

In-laws by definition are those relatives that one gains in marriage. The question is: How can we feel the same love and acceptance for the mate's family that we have for our own flesh and blood? Through two decades, more or less, we develop tender, special love feelings for our own primary family group and the people of it. Then, with the pronouncement as man and wife, we are expected to love the other's people as our own. Granted that warm acceptance is a strong unifying factor in in-law relationships, how is it attained?

The simplest answer seems to be that to the extent to which we have learned to love in our childhood homes, we have developed the capacities of affection and acceptance in ever widening relationships. This is therefore a matter of relative maturity, a factor of great importance in the business of living with others.

### **Maturity Among Adults**

Parents who are mature enough to love their children without hovering over them encourage them to grow up and out and away from them. Men and women who have failed to attain

their own autonomy apart from their children often cling and attempt to live their lives through their children. This is a suffocating and mutually frustrating experience for both parent and child. It is a pattern frequently reported as difficult among in-laws, as the two case excerpts below illustrate:

The C—s live with his mother who keeps house for them while they both work. The younger Mrs. C— regrets that her mother-in-law has made no life of her own, and lives entirely on and for them. The daughter-in-law feels that her husband's mother is petulant, interfering and dependent, a combination that is a constant irritant in their relationship. On a recent occasion, the daughter-in-law returned home tired from work to meet a steady barrage of such questions as,

"Did you put on your rubbers?"

"Are you sure you had your umbrella with you?"

"Did you chew your food well this noon?"

The mother-in-law finally stopped herself short and said,

"Here I am carrying on at you so, when I'm living off you, spending your money. . . ."

At which, the daughter-in-law broke in with,

"It isn't the money so much. You can have that . . . but you just leave my soul alone!"

After this, with a twist of wry humor, the mother-in-law would catch herself in the midst of a fussing episode to ask,

"Am I pinching your soul again?"

A prominent business man complains about his mother-in-law as follows:

"She is a wonderful woman, intelligent, kind, competent, and with a good business sense. When we bought a car, her advice helped us save a lot of money. When we bought a new home last year, her fine artistic ability helped us furnish it far better than we would have been able to ourselves.

"She means well, and she has been a real help. BUT—I wish to H— she would leave us alone. I want to make my own mistakes by myself. I can't kick her teeth in, so I cover my real feelings. And, I'm grateful too in a way for all she has done for us, but I wish she would let us alone and let us be ourselves."

The members of the younger generation in both cases are eager to become independent adults. They want to make their own mistakes and live their own lives without the hovering mother figure with her good or bad advice. They manifest

a tremendous urge for maturity and for autonomy. The evidence that they are struggling for maturity is apparent in the intensity of their emotional reactions to the interest and help that mother-in-law gives them.

Immature parents with incomplete capacity for wide involvements and interests are prone to remain dependent upon their children for their emotional satisfactions. This dependence often is infantilizing in its effect, keeping the children tied to "mother's apron strings" and delaying their maturing. This makes for stormy times when the desire for independence in the young revolts against the restraining overprotection of the parents, especially the mother. This is what David Levy calls "maternal overprotection," and what Philip Wylie labels "Momism." It is the most common complaint in in-law relationships.

Children who have been encouraged to grow in their ability to love and enjoy a wide variety of people outside the parental home have what it takes to accept members of the spouse's family without fear or guilt that they are being disloyal to their own parents. They have learned to accept others through years of experience in mutual acceptance, and so are prepared to marry into a second family and to build a third.

Such mature and maturing children develop most readily under the influence of parents who love them for themselves. As their children have grown, these parents have matured to the place where they have loves and interests that go beyond the children in ever widening and ever deepening circles of involvement. Because the parents are growing persons, the children are too. Together the two generations share, year after year, in the precious heritage of development and fulfillment. Maturity is not so much a matter of chronological age as it is the spirit of growth itself.

### **Early Marriage and In-Law Relationships**

Young people today marry at younger ages than did their parents and grandparents. Half of all our girls are married by

their twentieth birthday. And boys are but one or two years older than their brides when they marry. What is the effect upon their in-law relationships of this tendency to marry before the boy is ready to support the girl, and often before the young people are out of school?

There is considerable documentary evidence (Chapters 3, 6, 8) that many young couples greatly appreciate the help given them by their relatives by marriage. Although young in years, these young men and women show signs of being relatively mature emotionally at the time of their marriage. They give evidence in large numbers of having developed enough of a sense of their own autonomy so that they can become interdependent in their relationships with their parental families without threat of becoming overly dependent. They are the young people who have had enough experience in true acceptance and affection to be able to enjoy the mutual acceptance provided by the other side of the family.

At the same time, the tendency of young people to marry when they are scarcely out of their teens is used by some immature boys and girls as a way out from under parental domination or an unfortunate home situation, before they are emotionally ready for marriage. The case of Paulette above is an example. Such marriages, which in effect are but part of the declaration of independence that the young person is making from his or her family, are not firmly based and often do not weather the first few months or years of marriage.

These marriages of emotionally immature young people who are motivated by their emancipatory thrusts may be expected to have considerable in-law conflict; for the young man or woman coming into marriage before he or she is completely weaned from home quite likely parallels his rebellion from his own parents in his relationships with his parents-in-law. He comes with his mind set to allow no parental meddling in his life either from his own or his mate's family. And the slightest display of interest is therefore construed as meddling.

There are times when the emotional tie to one's own par-



ents is still so strong that the young person has difficulty feeling married in any real sense. These are the dynamics back of the "running home to mother" classic illustration of the bride who runs out on her husband when things get rough, and does what she has always done as a little girl—takes her hurts home to mother to fix. This is by no means a problem only of brides. The following case is an example of a bridegroom who married before he had emancipated himself from his mother's daily guidance:

When Tom and Elsie married they moved into the upstairs apartment in Tom's family home. It was a completely separate apartment for Elsie, who came and went quite independently by their separate front entrance. But for Tom who had grown up in the house, it was still his "Mom's place."

Tom was doing graduate work at the nearby university as he had before he married. He'd cut across the back yard on his way to classes in the morning much as he had been doing ever since he started at the university. And, in the afternoon when he returned home, he came in the back door, as usual, to find his mother waiting with a cup of coffee and a cookie along with her familiar smile and the inevitable, "Well, how did things go today, son?"

So, Tom would flop down at his mother's kitchen table and pour out the story of his day over two cups of coffee. But, by the time he got upstairs, to find Elsie waiting for him, he had nothing left to say in answer to her, "Have a good day, dear?" He'd mumble something about its having been all right, he guessed, and go in to the sunporch and tinker with his radio or records until she called him for dinner.

Elsie didn't want to appear jealous of her mother-in-law, but she felt that as man and wife she and Tom should share their lives first of all with each other. With Tom pouring out his experiences just to his mother the way he did day after day, Elsie was left out in the cold. And she didn't like it. She let things rock along for quite a while and then told Tom off in no uncertain terms. Tom was angry at Elsie for taking him to task for doing something he had done all his life. And when he told his mother, she was hurt and "set back on her heels."

Tom's mother suddenly realized what she had been doing in continuing the old pleasant afternoon chats with Tom that left Elsie upstairs all alone day after day. It wasn't easy. But Tom's mother got into the habit of being out afternoons, and left the back door

locked, so that Tom had to go up to his own home first upon his arrival home.

Early marriages accentuate in-law problems when one or both members of the pair are emotionally immature. Childish dependence upon parental approval and adolescent rebellion from parental interest are poor ingredients for marriage. When the young people are emotionally ready to establish their own home with neither a need to be dependent nor an urge to blindly rebel, they can accept a great deal of help from their parents and their parents-in-law without difficulty. The question is not just one of chronological age but of emotional maturity.

### **Changing Authority Patterns Between the Generations**

Robert Dinkel<sup>1</sup> in studying parent-adult child conflict reports:

. . . in many of the families studied the aged parents and their children believed in sets of mores which were incompatible and disagreed on the role of the elders in advising and correcting the younger people, but, nevertheless, tried to maintain a physical and psychological intimacy that gave ample opportunity for these irritants to take root and mature as major conflicts. (p. 415)

This factor seems to be operating in a great number of the families whose members have contributed personal documents to this present investigation. Older family members grew up in homes where authority was vested in the parents. They learned from their childhood on that "children should be seen and not heard," and all the rest of the slogans that kept children in subordinate positions. They assumed of course that "mother always knows best" and took it for granted that children should obey their parents. They accepted the role of watching over younger members of the family with a long list of do's and don'ts to guide them through the years.

These traditional conceptions of parenthood had their origins in the large rural family in earlier days, in the pioneer

home of the frontier, and in the authoritarian family life of central and southern Europe from which so many Americans came. Absolute authority made sense to Great-grandmother with a dozen mouths to feed, a sick relative in the back bedroom, vegetable soup on the back of the stove, and a quilt to finish in the back parlor. She had no time for nonsense. And her youngsters minded her or else . . .

In the pioneer family, children had to be closely protected from the lurking Indians, the snakes in the grass (real and human), the drunken brawlers, the ever-present danger of fire, and all the calamities of man and nature that made frontier life so rugged. Parents barked out their commands and yelled out their warnings in ways that commanded attention then. It isn't surprising that some of these patterns persist even yet.

Younger parents are beginning to repudiate these traditional conceptions of parenthood in favor of more developmental approaches.<sup>2</sup> Today's family life is no longer centered in the production of goods. Parents in the modern manner are concerned more specifically for the development of the personalities of their children and of themselves than Great-grandfather and Great-grandmother had time to be. This has brought a whole new relationship into being between the older and the younger generations. The formality and respect for elders that older people used to take for granted are rare among today's young people. The unquestioned authority of the father and mother has shifted to an authority of group-consultation in many homes of younger people. The older forms of physical punishment are giving way to types of discipline designed to help children learn what is expected of them, and to develop the skills that make for competence and adequacy.

This is all very well. Such changes are a part of making democracy work at home. But many older persons have had built into them the old authority patterns to the point where they intrude into their children's lives even more than they themselves know intellectually is wise. One young father

put the problem clearly at a meeting of a parents' class when he said:

My father was very strict and stern. He laid down the law and then enforced it by the application of the hairbrush in a ritualized kind of punishment in which I, his son, was marched upstairs by the ear whenever any infractions occurred. I was so resentful that I vowed to myself that if ever I had children of my own, I would never lay a hand on them. And, I didn't either, until last Wednesday when that three-year-old son of mine so got under my skin that before I realized what I was doing, there I was half way up the stairs with my son's ear in my hand—just the way my father used to do with me. But, I did not believe in whipping children. And I didn't want to hurt my boy . . . I felt pretty sheepish, and I'm still bewildered about what I found myself doing.

This young father was fortunate in that he intellectually was clear on what he wanted to do. He did not rationalize his annoyance at his son and his reaction to it by saying that his son would turn out wild without periodic applications of the hairbrush. He recognized that the problem was within himself, in the discrepancy between his goals and his behavior. He had been brought up in a way that had become a part of him, and in the excitement of a minor crisis with his son, he had reverted to his father's ways. So he was unable to carry out the calmer program of guidance with his child that he was attempting to establish.

The problem of vested authority internalized in this man is general in our entire culture. Members of older generations expect to assume more authority and control over younger members of the family than is generally thought to be wise today. Young married people writhe beneath the "snooper-vision" that was expected in former decades in continuing concern of older for younger members of the family. This is one foundation for the complaint of meddling and interference so common among young in-laws.

### **Times Have Changed Since Mother Was a Girl**

So, young people today do not behave in the way members of older generations did when they were young. The multi-



ple processes of industrialization, urbanization, secularization, and militarization of life through this century have brought about more social change than most people realize.

Where work used to be considered "good" and idleness "evil," today's youth appreciates the values inherent in recreation and is free to play in more ways and for longer periods than was possible in former decades. To members of older generations brought up to believe that "Satan finds work for idle hands to do," these galavanting young people are the cause of real anxiety.

Where yesterday, a man did not court a girl until he could support her in the style to which her parents wanted her to become accustomed, today's couples begin to date at early ages, to fall in and out of love through their teens, and to marry in large numbers before they are barely in their twenties. More open love-play, freer discussion of the facts of life, and evidence of more flexible moral standards give cause for tremendous anxiety on the part of parents and grandparents brought up to avoid even the appearance of such things.

Drinking, spending money in nonessential ways, driving automobiles at high speeds in search of some "hot" spot or exciting diversion, add fuel to the fires of indignation in older people over the delinquencies of youth, and the general irresponsibility of the times.

The fact that so many married young people have been thrust back upon their parental homes for help through the exigencies of military service only heightens the problem. In many cases, youth, sensing the disapproval of parents and parents-in-law from whom they have had to accept help, have reacted with defiance and resentment.

In other families the two generations have bridged their differences as they have been thrown together—at the departure of the boy for service, or the coming of a baby—and have attained mutual understanding and appreciation. This positive note runs through thousands of the personal documents of this investigation. It is hopeful not only in the accord afforded individual families, but especially in the adapt-

ability to changing times on the part of both generations that bodes well for the future. That so many parents and parents-in-law can keep up with the changes they have seen in their lifetimes is hopeful indeed. That so many young married people can and do find real friends among their in-laws and openly acknowledge their interdependence gives promise of more stability within the extended family than we have seen in some decades.

One pertinent aspect of the changing emotional climate, as we have seen, is the widespread repudiation of the mother-in-law stereotype so prominent in American humor up to the present time (Chapter 3). Still another good sign is seen in the reluctance with which parents-in-law criticize their sons- and daughters-in-law.

These trends toward mutual acceptance are to be encouraged not only as solutions to the in-law problem but especially as a more rational and wholesome appreciation of persons without the use of cultural crutches of the "youth is going to the dogs" variety, or "parents are old-fashioned" generalization, or "all in-laws are to be avoided" prescription of bygone days.

### **Changing Roles of Men and Women**

It was not very long ago that most people felt that woman's place was in the home. And of course it was. The farm woman was busy from dawn to dark raising and making and processing everything her big family needed. Her man needed a woman in the house, just as she needed a man to support and protect her.

Today the roles of both men and women are rapidly changing. A woman is no longer occupied twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, at the business of producing goods within the family—these functions have become big business today. A man is no longer the only source of economic support for a woman in a world where a woman can get an education and later a job that will support her through her lifetime.

Men and women today are free to work out a flexible division of labor that functions for them as persons in their particular situations in a way that never before has been open to the sexes. This has meant a great elaboration in the functions, responsibilities, and the privileges of both sexes, unheard of previously. In general, we find among young married couples that women are more at home in the community than were their mothers and grandmothers; while men are considerably more at home with their own families in intimate companionship than the austerity and authority of their fathers allowed.

These changes are inevitable; and functionally valuable both for the family and for society as a whole. But they bring their strains as any drastic changes do. The biggest of these stresses lies within the men and women themselves as they are challenged by situations for which traditional responses are no longer adequate. Many of these changes from one generation to another are blamed upon the parents-in-law, who personify the old in the minds of those who are trying to implement the new. Alice in the case that follows complains that her mother-in-law did her a great disservice in bringing up Billie to be so helpless in the kitchen:

Billie is a student of optometry, due to finish his training the end of next year. To help out financially until Billie gets established in his practice, Alice is working in the office of a social agency.

On the whole the marriage is working out nicely for both Billie and Alice, except for Thursday nights. Every other night of the week, Alice gets home at 5:30 in time to get the evening meal started before Billie arrives home from his afternoon laboratory courses at 6:00. But, on Thursday evening, Alice is always late arriving home. A late afternoon staff meeting is scheduled at the agency at 4:30 every week, which means that every Thursday Alice gets home considerably later than does her husband.

Lately, Alice discovered that she gets a violent headache on Thursday afternoon, and that when she finally gets home and tries to put her key in the door, her hand shakes so that she can hardly make it. "It's psychological," says Alice, as she describes the scene upon her homecoming. There sits Billie slumped down in his chair behind the newspaper, sullen and unhappy in coming home to a dark house

with no meal prepared for him and no wife to greet him at the end of his day. Alice finds herself banging the pans around in the kitchen to get her hostility out of her system at having to start meal preparations from scratch when she too is tired and hungry. She says, resentfully,

"And it has never occurred to Billie that HE might set the table, and put the potatoes on to cook . . ."

Billie responds with a hurt look in his eyes and an air of bewilderment. His bafflement comes out of the twenty-four years he spent in his mother's home before he and Alice set up housekeeping together. Billie grew up the youngest of three sons of a formal, old-fashioned father who always came home at the end of the day and spent the hour before the evening meal was served with his paper in the living room. The few times that Billie volunteered to help his mother in the kitchen, she had shooed him out, and told him to go sit with his brothers and his father and wait for her to call them all to eat. She spent her entire life in that kitchen, and prided herself on the good table she set for her menfolks. Never once, can Billie remember one of his brothers, his father, or himself lifting a finger to help out in the preparation of food or the cleaning up afterwards. In his experience, a man does not belong in the kitchen. It doesn't seem natural to him . . .

And yet, as Billie and Alice talk out their mutual Thursday evening tensions, the simplest solution seems to be for him to get things started so that when Alice does arrive home late and tired and hungry they can both sit down to a hot meal.

It isn't an easy adjustment, and Alice blames the need for it on her "old-fashioned" mother-in-law who never taught her boys how to be at home in the kitchen.

In-laws are problems in part because they are living examples of ways of life that the members of the pair have grown up in, and personal reminders of whatever conflicts arise between the pair. This is probably one reason why the members of each other's families are brought up as the horrible examples of a repudiated way of life whenever an argument becomes heated. It isn't just what they do, it is what relatives by marriage ARE that often becomes the issue between the married pair.

### **Responsibility for Aging Relatives**

Now that many men and women live longer, the problem of whose responsibility they are becomes acute.



It was simpler in earlier times when there was a place in the family for aging relatives. In the old farm home, there was always something for willing hands to do: rock the cradle, sit with the children, make the apple butter, and knit the mittens. Such services made a grandmother feel that she was worth her salt in her married son's or daughter's home. There was always plenty to eat, so an extra person in the household merely meant setting an extra place. There was room, and a general acceptance of the aging as members of the family that is relatively rare today.

Today, an older relative who must make his or her home with the family feels, in many a case, only in the way. There is so little to do, so little room, so little inclination to double up in a culture that says, "No roof is big enough for two families."

In this changing climate of opinion, no matter what the older person does or does not do, only annoyance and resentment results. It is what they ARE that is rejected, as one man puts clearly when he asks:

What can you do with a mother-in-law who just *sits*—day after day, evening after evening, all she does is SIT there. We may want to have company in. The children want to study and listen to the radio and enjoy their friends. But we all feel restrained from doing anything because of the continuous inertia of that perpetual *sitter*.

In such an emotional atmosphere of resentment, a mother-in-law would find it hard to express any opinion without being considered meddling. She would find it almost impossible to express interest in any of these family members without being dubbed possessive. If she tries to help, she's interfering. If she just sits, she is a silent restraint.

These young rejecting families are of the generation brought up to feel that "every tub should sit on its own bottom." This is the generation that has had as its goal in life, a home of one's own where "Molly and me, and baby makes three." These are the husbands and wives who have struggled to make their own way, have tried to "get ahead in the world" as they had been taught to do. These are the adult children

who were taught when they were young, "You can be better than we were. You can get ahead." These are the men and women who worked their way through school beyond where their parents went, and then went to night school and took summer courses besides. This is the generation brought up to live by the motto, "He travels fastest who travels alone."

And so there is no place in the family for aging family members, *unless*——

Unless the older relative can make a contribution to the on-going life of the family as a participating member. Babies still need to be cared for. Meals need to be prepared. Shopping needs to be done. Clothes need to be laundered and shirts ironed. In many a home where the wife and mother is busy outside at either a paying job or in community service, an older woman relative can be, and is, a stabilizer for the whole family, as hundreds of human documents detail (See Chapter 6).

Unless the older relative recognizes the autonomy of the members of the younger generation and has a life that is satisfying enough in itself, there is the ever-present danger of intruding and living *for* the younger family members rather than *with* them.

Unless the young family is sound enough in its own foundations to assimilate the weight of still another person of different age and background, the structure may be weakened. Emotionally mature young adults can tolerate a considerable amount of difference in everyday living because, as they have developed, they have learned to live with difference and not to expect the world to center in them. A well-knit marriage relationship can accept the responsibility and the privilege of an older relative in the home with poise and appreciation where a less stable union might topple under the additional strain imposed.

The simple fact is that styles in the care of aging relatives have changed. The cultural prejudice against assimilating older family members has a real foundation. But this does not mean that older family members must be universally rejected.

In the words of one man who speaks for many hundreds of persons who have volunteered their experiences, "My mother-in-law lives with us and we love it."

That does not mean that the only solution to the problem lies in taking aging relatives into the family circle. It does mean that while we are about the business of repudiating the mother-in-law stereotype as unfair and mutually harmful, we can avoid the hazards of overgeneralizing about the responsibility for aging family members.

The personal-social solutions to the problem open up only when we as a people throw off the labels that keep us from seeing others and ourselves as persons, and begin to expose ourselves to the process of intelligent inquiry that is central in education and progress.

### **The Need for Education for Adulthood**

Graduation from high school is called "Commencement." And it truly is. Only as we emerge out of childhood and youth do we begin to find out what life is all about as adults. Yet, few of us are prepared for what it means to become men and women, to choose a mate, get married, become fathers and mothers, and sons-in-law and daughters-in-law, and all the rest. We know little of what is expected of us in these complicated interrelated roles that are themselves in the process of shifting even as we struggle to attain them.

Our challenge today is for a continuing exposure to the kind of educational stimuli that will help us gain a sense of self in our many adult roles. We need to know what is expected of us in our changing roles, and to re-examine and re-define our expectations of ourselves and our loved ones in the family without the "black magic" of stereotyped taboos, or the home remedies of too-pat solutions for our ills.

In our intrafamily relations we need the spirit of inquiry that has pushed back the mysteries of medicine and science. We need the same kind of devoted discipline in our pursuit of solutions to ways of living together in our families that we

used so effectively in meeting the challenges of yellow fever, smallpox, and bubonic plague.

The willingness to face ourselves, to question our shibboleths, and to examine our mythologies, which shows up in the attitudes of so many of the men and women in this study, must be followed with much more basic research into the dynamics of family living. A concomitant program of education for family life dealing with the realities that are known, and opening up for consideration the many unexplored growing edges of our personal-family experience, is imperative.

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## Becoming a Better In-Law

BECOMING is a life-long task for all of us. We start with nothing more than a multitude of potentialities. Then as life's challenges come along, we learn what it takes to meet them. We are not born good or bad in-laws. We grow into the knowledge, the skills, and the appreciations that make the kind of person with whom our relatives find it good to live.

Most of us want to become more effective in our interpersonal and intrafamily relationships. We may be doing fairly well in them. But, even so, there is room for improvement. Or, we may be having some particularly difficult problems with our relatives by marriage. Then we are faced with the challenge of finding out what it takes to make real progress toward the resolution of our problems.

If we are wise, we know that the best way of improving relationships with other people is to change our own ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving. We may run into a wall of resistance if we try to make others over to our ways. But, as soon as we look for what we ourselves may do to adapt more skillfully to the realities of the situations and the persons involved, we make progress.

The inference is, if you want to get along better with your in-laws, your best approach is to start with yourself. As you learn how to become a better in-law, you will have more success with your in-laws. This is not just "sermonizing" but a

sound generalization of education, psychology, and preventive psychiatry.

Fortunately, there are many implications arising out of this exploratory study that may be useful to any of us who would like to know what it takes to become a better in-law. Our cases represent everything from the most hostile, bitter, resentful in-law relationships to the most harmonious, loving, mutually satisfying relations with relatives by marriage. Many cases illustrate movement toward improvement in family harmony. The review of the literature, as well as our own case data and statistical findings of what is most important among the factors for success with in-laws, are tapped in this chapter.

### **In-Law Stereotypes Can Be Renounced**

Already from this preliminary investigation of in-law relationships, it is clear that several of the traditional old wives' tales about in-laws are not necessarily true. Specifically,

1. Mother-in-law is *not* always a curse; oftentimes she is a real blessing.
2. People do *not* always find it impossible to live with or near their in-laws; many do so and like it.
3. Men are *not* more frequently annoyed by their in-laws than are women; quite the contrary.
4. Parents-in-law are *not* more critical of their children's spouses than the other way around; it is the younger generation that is the more critical.
5. Keeping quiet about in-law problems is *not* the only way to deal with them; many people prefer clearing up their differences as they arise.
6. A person need *not* feel helpless about his in-law relationships; there is a great deal that can be done to make them satisfactory.

There is evidence that repeating traditional prejudices only perpetuates in-law problems and often increases the anxiety and resistance people feel toward their own in-laws.

Those who would become better in-laws, therefore, refrain from telling the old mother-in-law jokes and from encouraging those who do. They recognize that in the same way that we effectively combat prejudice against ethnic and racial groups by discouraging hostile humor directed against them, so too we have a responsibility for renouncing stereotyped mother-in-law humor (Chap. 3).

The use of "labels" is semantically unsound with in-laws as with other groupings of persons. Assuming that mother-in-law is meddlesome just because she is a mother-in-law is fallacious thinking and in itself may lead to trouble with her. Expecting members of the older generation to be "old-fashioned" just because of their age is not only misleading but it also erects a barrier between younger and older relatives.

It is better to recognize that in-laws are individual persons. Each has his or her own rights, privileges, and responsibilities. Each has his or her own problems, hopes, dreams, mistakes, successes, sorrows and triumphs. Each plays out his own roles in ways that he has learned through the years. Each one is worth knowing for himself. And the better he is understood, the more understandable his behavior will be.

### **Choosing In-Laws Like Yourself**

The chances are that the more like you your in-laws are, the better you will understand each other. The same thing is true of the two persons who marry. If they resemble each other in many ways such as coming from the same general kind of family, being of the same religious faith, and sharing a common style of life, they tend more frequently to love each other, to marry, and to make a good marriage, than if they greatly differ in background. More than one hundred studies to date agree on this. Our evidence is that although there are many ways in which in-laws act in the face of a mixed marriage, there are difficulties in marrying outside one's own kind of people that are not encountered in choosing a mate from a family like one's own (Chap. 5).

This does not imply that one should choose one's in-laws first, and then marry one of their children (although some of our cases suggest just that). But it does strongly indicate that one way of assuring harmony with one's in-laws is to marry someone whose family is congenial.

In this point, our findings corroborate those of Sussman<sup>1</sup> who finds that difficulty of intergenerational families in solving differences is positively correlated with differences in cultural background between parents and children-in-law (significant at .01 level). Joint activities between parents' and children's families are positively correlated with similarity of background (significant at the .01 level).

The reasons why both Sussman's and our data indicate as strongly as they do that homogamy (the tendency of persons from similar backgrounds to marry) is favorable to harmony with relatives by marriage are not hard to see. When you share a similar way of life with your spouse and his or her family, you have a great deal in common with them and they with you. Your ways of behaving are understandable to each other. Your roles with each other are in harmony because you have similar expectations as to what is appropriate.

### **Families Get Acquainted in Courtship**

It is a good idea for the young couple to become acquainted with each other's family during the courtship period. As they visit in each other's homes, they absorb the atmosphere in which the beloved was reared, they gain some personal acceptance in the other family before the marriage, their presence readies both sets of parents for the approaching marriage, and they take the first important steps in getting to know each other's relatives as persons, rather than just as "in-laws," before the marriage.

The privilege of knowing the other's family well during courtship is usually a one-sided one among American couples. The boy conventionally has the advantage of knowing the girl's family from the moment of his first date. As he comes



and goes in the home of his sweetheart during the courtship period, he comes to be known by, and to know this "other family," in ways rarely available to his girl in getting acquainted with his family. When a couple is going together, the girl usually has few opportunities to become acquainted with the young man's parents. They are sometimes far away. Even when they live close by, asking her to visit his parents is not as common a practice as expecting him to come to her home. The consequence is that commonly the bride is not as well acquainted with her in-laws as the husband is with his. In many cases she meets her parents-in-law only after her marriage.

Many a bride is precipitated into an intimately familiar relationship with her "other family" knowing little of what to expect of them save what her mate has told her. Personally they are strangers to her. She does not know how they will feel about her, what they are like, how she will get along with them, or what they will expect of her until she is brought home to meet them as their "new daughter."

It is not surprising then, to find brides generally expressing anxiety about not being accepted readily into the husband's family. As we saw in Chapter 5, the welcome the bride longs for, but fears she may not receive from his mother, is often fed by real and imagined differences between the families: cultural, ethnical, religious, etc. This is aggravated further by the old wives' tale that tells the bride that mothers-in-law are difficult, demanding, meddlesome and hard to please. So the bride dreads her first meeting with her mother-in-law and tortures herself with the fear that her mother-in-law will not like her.

There are a number of cases in which the recognition of the importance of becoming acquainted before marriage led to ingenious plans for bringing the two families together during the courtship period. One couple planned a joint vacation for themselves and both sets of parents the summer before they were to be married. Needless to say, the reason why this seemed possible at all was that the two older couples shared

similar interests and were basically kindred spirits. In other cases the boy's mother has called upon the girl's parents with an invitation to a picnic, a family dinner, or some other informal family gathering in which both families might become acquainted before they all become "in-laws."

### **Weddings Are Family Affairs**

Weddings benefit by the participation of the families. As the bride's mother goes through the ritual preparation for the wedding, she feels that she is a part of her daughter's marriage and gives it her blessing in action.

Possibly one reason why the boy's mother gets off on the wrong foot with her daughter-in-law so much more often than does the bride's mother with her son-in-law is that the boy's mother typically is not drawn into the wedding plans. One wise girl sensed this and consulted her prospective mother-in-law on the wedding plans step by step as they progressed. She found her sweetheart's mother deeply touched by her thoughtfulness, and she built then a basis for a sound relationship with her mother-in-law.

Elopements do not turn out successfully as often as do those marriages that are solemnized by weddings and blessed by both sets of parents. One reason may be that the parents feel left out of the marriage when the couple elopes, and these hurts rankle in the future relationships between the couple and their parents.

Sussman<sup>2</sup> finds evidence that the wedding brings prestige to the parents, among their own friends, and helps them ease into their new roles as parents of married children. Our data are compatible with these observations, with revelations on the place the wedding of one's child has in readying oneself for the adjustment ahead. One mother puts it simply when she says that getting her youngest daughter through the maze of wedding plans gave her the feeling of completion that set her free from her previous responsibilities as mother. In fact, she and her husband took themselves on "a graduation trip" as

soon as the girl's wedding was over, to further mark the end of one era in their marriage and the beginning of the new era as a couple again.

When the two lines are joined at the marriage of the couple, members of both families participating can feel a part of the larger joint family in a way not likely to occur among non-participating relatives. This family "we" feeling establishes a sound foundation for good in-law relationships.

### **Good In-Laws Are Maturing Persons**

Maturity is important for family harmony. The clinging, dependent man or woman who does not assume responsibility for himself or herself is a burden on the family and is often resented by the "in-laws" as one who usurps more than his or her share of attention.

The sibling rivalry problem that looms large as a difficulty with sisters-in-law is essentially a symptom of immaturity in which brother and sister have not grown up out of their childhood bickerings. The meddlesome, possessive mother-in-law is usually the mother who has not matured beyond her mothering roles that were appropriate when her children were small but are resented now that they are married. The incompetent brother-in-law and the ineffectual father-in-law who represent the majority of difficult male in-laws are usually the "little boys who never grew up." Their friends look upon them with tolerant amusement. But it isn't so funny to live in a family with a brother-in-law who won't support his family, or with a father-in-law who is incompetent in even the simplest roles of husband, provider, and father-in-law.

Most striking of all instances of immaturity as responsible for in-law problems is seen in the adolescent rebellion kind of resentment at any "interference" on the part of the older generation. The son-in-law may rebuff even the kindest offer of help from his wife's parents because he is still emotionally fighting for his own autonomy and cannot yet play mature roles of adult interdependence. Even more often, the daugh-

ter-in-law manifests her immaturity with a chip-on-the-shoulder attitude toward her mother-in-law that stems directly from her incomplete emancipation from her own parents. As she matures, she welcomes what help her mother-in-law and other older women may give her in learning the new roles of marriage and motherhood. But until that time comes, she expects trouble and usually finds it with her in-laws, as this case excerpt expresses,

. . . this mother-daughter-in-law trouble comes less often from a meddling mother-in-law than from a touchy wife, unreasonably jealous of her independence, who regards as "interference" any attempt, however well-intentioned, to aid her in her youth and ignorance. (Mrs. I., South Dakota)

Maturing is a process operating in each person. Maturity is not achieved in a single bound, nor at any particular time in the life of the individual. We all start as completely dependent infants. As we mature, we grow toward independence in the gradual process of freeing ourselves from those who have nurtured us, and in sudden spurts toward emancipation in which we rebel from anything that resembles parental authority. Beyond adolescent striving for autonomy, we grow into fuller and more meaningful interdependence with others.

Those who have matured beyond the infantilisms of childhood and the rebellion of adolescence are growing at the level of maturity that is good to live with. By and large, these are the relatively mature individuals, of whatever age, who get along with their in-laws, with their marriage partners, and with themselves.

Whoever you are, you can keep on growing. No matter how old you are, maturity is still a challenge if you have found the secret of being radiantly alive. For to live is to grow. To stop growing is to die.

The rewards of personal growth toward maturity are real. You find personal satisfaction in everyday living. You do not have to depend upon others for fulfillment. You become the interesting person that others enjoy being with. You are able to relate yourself pleasantly to others and to share and be



shared in mutually satisfying interdependence. This is the quality that makes for good in-law relationships. It is as simple, and as complicated, as life itself.

### **Keeping Channels Open Within the Larger Family**

Many persons report that they became better in-laws as they kept matters of family interest open and above board. Others regret that as lines of communication with their relatives have been blocked off, hurts and resentments have festered in these blocked off areas. Indications are that good relationships with in-laws are fostered by open, honest dealings with them.

Married women who have found their relationships with their mothers-in-law pleasant are often those who have the established practice of consulting the older woman on matters in which she may be helpful. They ask for suggestions. And, in the act of seeking advice, do not ward it off as unwelcome "interference."

Making decisions jointly with others in the family is an established method of getting along well in the family. As the relatives who are concerned are consulted, each feels "in on" the decision, and shares responsibility for it. Persons of every age and relationship are apt to be hurt when they are ignored in decisions that affect them. Conversely, men and women generally appreciate a chance to participate in family planning and decision-making.

You become a better in-law as you keep channels of communication open between you and your relatives by marriage. Instead of stifling your real feelings, you get them out in the open so that others may know how you really feel about things. Similarly, you encourage the others to express their sentiments and attitudes, so that you may better understand what things mean to them. The following excerpt shows what this process looks like in action,

From the very beginning my mother-in-law and I had an understanding never to hold anything back from each other no matter how unpleasant. You'd be surprised how things can be ironed out

smoothly if discussed sensibly instead of piling up as grudges. Therefore, we have avoided arguments by discussing any difference that arose. (Mrs. W., New Jersey)

Not every family will avoid arguments by bringing feelings out into the open. But arguments are not to be feared. Often-times, the real issues and values can be aired in a good constructive argument more fully than in any other way. As we have said elsewhere,<sup>3</sup> "conflict has a dual function: the solution of issues, and the release of the resentment and tensions which arise in any relationship."

### **Living with Your Differences**

You become a better in-law as you develop skill in living with your differences in the family. No two people see eye to eye about everything. Differences between members of a family are inevitable. Just because you care about each other, and about what happens in the family, means that differences between you will occur from time to time. But they need not shatter the relationship. When conflicts are faced without alarm, guilt, shame, or recrimination, they can be dealt with openly as they arise. People who accept the fact that they do differ, learn to resolve their conflicts in ways that protect the values of each individual. Open discussion and mutual consultation are recommended procedures as we saw above. Most important for success is the sincere willingness to see various possibilities and to avoid the compulsive "set" for one and only one solution to the problem under discussion.

In-laws are frequently used as weapons in marital spats. Some disagreement arises between husband and wife, and in the heat of the moment, he lashes out, "You are just like your mother." Or, she angrily accuses him, "You are no better than that no-good brother of yours." Or they take each other's family as the personification of the very fault that has precipitated the quarrel in the first place. Such techniques are to be expected since in a very real way each marital partner is the product of the family out of which he or she came. When

he is under attack, the husband stands as the living embodiment of his family values and teachings. Only as the in-laws are recognized and accepted as persons, as well as a labeled class, are they relatively exempt from being cast in these unpleasant roles as scapegoats.

When some relative on either side of the family embodies a way of life contrary to the values of the family, he or she may be used as "the bad example" by common consent within the family circle. Parents bring their children up with warnings not to "be like your Uncle Jim," or threats that if the child continues in his behavior, he will turn out no better than the ugly old so-and-so who happens to be a much-hated or feared relative.

The obviously successful family member may become the model by which children's behavior is compared, with the familiar, "Aunt Goody would do it this way." Or the superior relative may be continually whittled down to size with the "who-does-he-think-he-is" kind of resentment.

Whatever the particular pattern in the family at the moment, the fact is that in-laws are often used as focal points in family conflict. They are apt to be found in the vortex of a family storm. Just because of the position they have as relatives on one side of the family, they personify differences between "His family," "Her family," and "Our family," that must be resolved from time to time.

Those who would become better in-laws recognize the precarious roles they play within the family, and diligently try to master the process of living with inevitable differences in the family with competence and poise.

### **How to Live with Your In-Laws**

Folklore has it that no two families can live happily together under one roof. Yet we have hundreds of cases of families who do live with their in-laws, and happily. How they do it is important for the millions of us who must from time to time double up with our relatives for long or short periods.

Living with one side of the family or the other is a stark necessity in many modern situations. Depression brings widespread doubling-up with relatives. Wartime mobilization, with its widespread military service of young married men, is responsible for wives and children making their home for many months or even years with the wife's "other family." Sickness and other family crises are the reasons for having to join forces under one roof for a while. Aging relatives have no other place to go than to the home of one of their married children in many cases. How individual men and women work out their relationships with in-laws sharing the same home is a story that has been told with hundreds of variations by the persons who have participated in this exploratory study. A summary of the most frequently mentioned recommendations for living with in-laws follows.

### **When You Live with Your In-Laws**

1. Develop together a clear understanding of financial, household, and other responsibilities so that each one may know just what is expected of him or her.
2. Be reasonable in your expectations of one another. No one is perfect. Everyone makes mistakes from time to time. Perfectionists are hard to live with in any family.
3. Make some provision for protecting the personal property for each member of the family. It may be little more than a closet or a bureau of his or her own, but everyone welcomes some place for his things that will be respected as his alone.
4. Respect each person's need for privacy. It is not only the great who need their "islands of solitude" as Adlai Stevenson suggests. The elderly, the adolescent, and all the rest of us from time to time desire undisturbed privacy. We have the right to open our own mail, answer our own phone calls, and make our own friends with some sense of privacy.
5. Encourage each member of the household to develop



his own talents and to pursue his own interests in his own way. This means you too.

6. Jointly plan for whole-family activities so that each may have a share in deciding what is to be done and what part he or she will play in the affair.
7. As disagreements arise, and they will from time to time, take the time to hear the other(s) out. Listen well enough to get what the situation means to those who differ from you. Respond to their feelings as well as to the "sense" of the situation.
8. Unify the larger family unit sharing the household by celebrations and rituals that bring the family closer together in its own most meaningful ways.
9. Take a positive attitude toward your joint living arrangement by being appreciative of the benefits derived from sharing the household, rather than merely bemoaning the sacrifices involved.
10. Gain some perspective by realizing that through the ages, families have lived more often together than in the little separate family units more popular today.

### **Help Your Mother-in-Law Feel Important**

There have been times and places where a mother-in-law was very important. Age was venerated in the Great Family of bygone times. Mother-in-law held a position of power and authority. She was respected not only for herself, but also for her position in the family.

Not so today. Youth rather than age is valued in today's small city family. The young wife and mother along with her husband, "the man of the house," comes first. And mother-in-law plays second fiddle, if she plays at all. This is an uneasy role for the woman who once was herself the voice of authority in her own home. It is a confused role according to the multitude of mothers-in-law who try to find a real place for themselves after their children have grown. Today a mother-in-law tends to feel unimportant, unwanted, uncared

for. Such feelings of insecurity affect all her relationships adversely. Only as mother-in-law is helped to feel important for herself, are life-long pleasant relationships with her assured.

Many suggestions are made by men and women who recognize the importance of helping mother-in-law keep her self-respect and maintain her self-confidence. Some of the tested ways for helping mother-in-law feel important are briefly discussed in the paragraphs that follow.

Some mothers-in-law need help in keeping up to date. When children have grown, and a woman is left at home alone with her memories, it is easy for her to lose interest in life and in herself. As mother-in-law is encouraged to spend some time and money on herself, she may gain the self-confidence that comes with appearing well groomed and attractive. Many middle-aged women are as attractive as they ever have been in their lives. More could improve their appearance and their outlook on life with the active encouragement of their married children's families.

Keeping up to date means keeping informed on happenings in the world outside. Mothers-in-law are often, for the first time in their lives, free to follow the news, and to weigh conflicting viewpoints with wisdom. But they may need some assistance in getting started in these new roles and habits. This is the time of life when a radio of her own, a daily newspaper and a weekly news commentary, a television set, and perhaps a current events course, can make the difference between dull, drab existence and vigorous aliveness.

Education in the middle years has unplumbed possibilities. Refresher courses for grandmothers help many a woman to evaluate her own past experience in child rearing, and to better adapt herself to the changing needs of her growing families. A Great Books course may meet her needs in making sense out of a multitude of experiences as she becomes familiar with the ideas, concepts, and problems as old as humanity. Training in special areas may be opportune in rekindling old interests, developing creative hobbies, sharpening salable skills, deepening her insights, or broadening the base of her

activities. Mental hygiene, preventive psychiatry, education for family living, and the allied applications of social science are not only intriguing intellectual highways for the experienced woman, but also have direct and manifold implications for her new adjustments as a mother-in-law.

By the time a woman has raised her own family, she has the wisdom that comes from experience that has many possible applications in the world's housekeeping. She is the backbone of many church activities. Her volunteer functions keep the community organizations and service societies going. Politically she can be a real force in block organizations, neighborhood, county-wide, state and national agencies like the League of Women Voters, and party organizations. No one questions the contributions of the famous mothers-in-law of Eleanor Roosevelt's stature. The multitudes of women of lesser size politically also have their roles to play in the world's work. Many of them would do so gladly with just a bit more encouragement and a little less derision on the part of their children-in-law.

Mother-in-law feels important when her efforts are appreciated. Yet it falls to the lot of many a mother-in-law to be taken for granted. If she steps in and helps a family through a bad time, she is just doing what she is supposed to do, with little recognition of her efforts as such. When she is constantly on tap as baby sitter, she wants to be appreciated at least as much as a stranger would be for similar service, even though she is not paid for it. When she performs any service she wants the courtesy of simple gratitude sincerely expressed, in order to feel that her efforts have been worth while.

Being invited to share married children's hospitality makes a mother-in-law feel important. When she is asked to come to her children's homes for a pleasant meal, a fancy party, or an informal picnic, she feels wanted as a person. All too often, married children fail to reciprocate their parents' hospitality. One case reports countless meals the married children enjoyed at the old homestead, with never a return invitation proffered. This case is extreme, but there are many others in which the

mother-in-law's hospitality is taken for granted with only very rare, and oftentimes grudging efforts to reciprocate. On the other side, are the many warm expressions of appreciation from mothers-in-law who have been the grateful recipients of courtesy and kindness at the hands of their children-in-law through the years.

Mother-in-law sometimes needs the reassurance that she is all right. As illness strikes her, she may overreact to the besetting malady out of fear of the incapacity that comes with advancing years. Reassurance from interested children and children-in-law goes far to encourage her to follow medical advice to a complete recovery. Similarly, she may profit by their help in settling a family estate, or getting her financial house in order. As she feels that her married children are back of her, she may have just the encouragement she needs to assume responsibility for her affairs with courage and wisdom.

Mothers-in-law often feel useless unless something is done to make them truly wanted. It isn't always easy to find avenues for untouched mother-in-law abilities. Yet ingenuity works wonders in this as in other areas of life. Mrs. Nash of North Carolina tells of the innovation that she and a friend of hers developed to solve two difficult mother-in-law situations. Mrs. Nash, a busy professional woman, shared her home with her own mother-in-law who is a gracious little old lady with no desire or ability to help around the busy household. The friend's mother-in-law is the executive type who loves to run things and was spoiling for something to do. She was driving her own full-time homemaker daughter whose home she shared to distraction with her interfering efforts to be helpful. The two women swap mothers now, with Mrs. Nash having the benefit of a capable, efficient woman in charge of her household while she is professionally active, and the friend has a quiet sweet old lady contented to spend the day in her rocker with her needlepoint while the well-run household flows around her. The two mothers-in-law live happily with their own families, largely because of the harmonious roles



they play each day after breakfast in each other's homes. At last report the system "works like magic."

Mother-in-law's role in family continuity should be recognized as important. As she, and other older family members, share their memories and their treasured keepsakes, they give their children and their children's children the family traditions that assure family stability. It is the old family jokes, the often retold tales, the accounts of family trials and triumphs that give perspective more than an objective historical account of the period ever could. Children adore hearing about the "olden days when you were young, Grandma." As parents encourage these recitals, they not only inflate Grandma's feeling of importance, but give their children a sense of continuity that they themselves but one generation older could not.

Mother-in-law is important, as a person, and to her family. When she is encouraged to realize her potentialities, she is safeguarded from the temptations to be meddlesome and possessive of her children's families. As she is encouraged to live at her own growing best, she keeps alive as a person, and is fun to be with. When she is appreciated for what she is, as well as for what she does, she gets the self-confidence that is basic in the mental health of anyone whose roles are indefinite and undefined. More than anyone else in modern society, mother-in-law needs reassurance because her place is not clear. When more of us give ourselves to the care and nurture of mother-in-law, our families will be better places for all of us.

### **Why Some People Have No Problems with Their In-Laws**

Some people have no trouble getting along with their in-laws. They tell us in no uncertain terms that they have no problems with their relatives by marriage. How they do it and what the factors are that lead to family harmony give us many leads on how to be better in-laws.

When more than thirteen hundred persons were asked to

tell which in-law relationship they had found most difficult and to indicate what had made it troublesome, they were given the alternative of reporting that they had had "No problems." Out of the 1,337 men and women participating in this group interview phase of the study, 345 (25.8%) volunteered 748 reasons for the accord they had achieved with their in-laws.

The 748 reasons for having no problems with in-laws reveal some interesting differences in the frequencies of various factors mentioned. These are ranked in the original wording in Table 35.

These fifteen groupings of verbatim responses roughly parallel the fifteen categories used in analyzing in-law difficulties. Several constellations appear in the categories above. In combinations these items making for harmony in in-law relationships reveal several factors that merit our attention. These are detailed with corroborating evidence in the sections that follow.

The fifteen categories in Table 35 are arbitrary. They are simply a means of tabulating verbatim responses in ways that reveal significant factors. Now, if we coalesce similar groupings into major factors, we see three common denominators in these hundreds of reports of harmonious relationships with in-laws: 1) acceptance, 2) mutual respect, and 3) no opportunity.

### **Acceptance Is Important**

"They accept me," is the primary reason for accord among in-laws given nearly one out of five times (18.6%). When this top-ranking category is merged with other responses of similar attitude, the factor of acceptance looms imposingly large, as we see in Table 36.

We see that more than forty out of one hundred reasons (40.9%) for having no problems with in-laws are basically those of acceptance. Three hundred and six out of the total of 748 reasons for accord mention the fundamental attitude of acceptance among in-laws as important.

TABLE 35

REASONS FOR NO PROBLEMS WITH IN-LAWS REPORTED BY 345 PERSONS

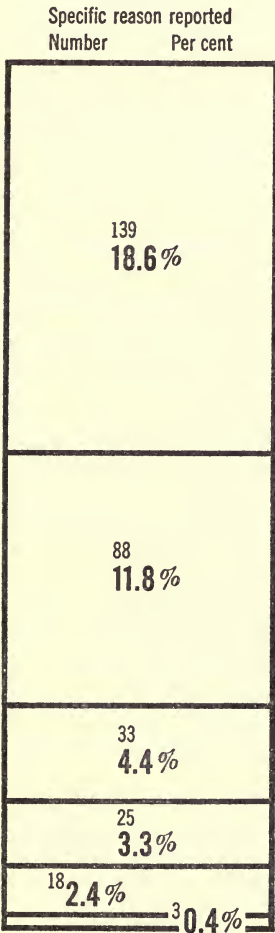
<i>Why In-Laws Are "No Problem"</i>	<i>Specific Reason Reported</i>	
	<i>Number</i>	<i>Per Cent</i>
1. They accept me; they are friendly, helpful, close	139	18.6
2. They do not meddle, interfere, or butt into my life	112	14.9
3. They are thoughtful, kind, considerate, generous	88	11.8
4. They are too far away; we rarely see them; haven't met	88	11.8
5. No reason given for "No problem" report	54	7.2
6. No in-laws: I married an orphan, etc.	43	5.8
7. Determination to adjust: we respect each other's rights; we work things out as they come up; etc.	38	5.1
8. They are mature, have outside interests, are independent	36	4.8
9. They love me; we have mutual affection and trust; they back me when I need it; etc.	33	4.4
10. We are congenial, have similar interests and standards; they fit in, are tolerant of our differences; etc.	33	4.4
11. They come only when invited, do not overstay visits, are always welcome, do not abuse hospitality, etc.	29	3.9
12. They understand me, listen to me, are understanding people	25	3.3
13. They are not critical, do not get impatient with me, etc.	18	2.4
14. They are not demanding or possessive; let us be free; etc.	9	1.2
15. They do not act superior, nor make me feel inferior, etc.	3	0.4
Total	748	100.0

A few of the verbatim excerpts from the personal documents of men and women underlining the importance of acceptance in intrafamily harmony, give the flavor of the whole:

They accept me with love and understanding, and they give us help when it is needed (not necessarily financial). (39-year-old Kansas City Catholic woman)

TABLE 36

The factor of acceptance  
in In-law harmony



Category number and content  
from Table 35

- 1) They accept me; they are friendly, helpful, close
- 3) They are thoughtful, kind, considerate, and generous
- 9) They love me; they back me when I need it; etc.
- 12) They understand me, listen to me, etc.
- 13) They are not critical; do not get impatient with me; etc.
- 15) They do not act superior, nor make me feel inferior, etc.

Total Acceptance  
mentions | 306  
40.9 %



They have taken me in as one of them. They have shared with me. They have been kind to my people. (31-year-old Mississippi woman)

They are kind to me. They treat me as one of the family. They take my part if an argument arises. (38-year-old Mississippi woman)

We have pleasant family reunions at intervals with *acceptance* of me as a *real member* of the family. (43-year-old North Carolina woman)

From my wedding day I called my husband's parents Mother and Father, and my in-laws accepted me from the beginning as a member of their family. (40-year-old New Jersey woman)

### **Mutual Respect a Factor in Family Harmony**

"We respect each other's personalities," is a frequent refrain in the reasons men and women give for their lack of in-law problems. People use various wordings, but the fundamental sentiment is that of respecting each other as persons, with rights to live their lives as they see fit, and with a willingness to work out differences that arise in ways that maintain the values of each person involved. The factor of mutual respect evolves from the merger of several categories of responses detailed earlier in Table 35.

In this merger of categories in which mutual respect is the predominant sentiment, we find a total of 257 mentions. This is more than one-third of the total reasons given for harmony among in-laws (34.3%). Excerpts from reports of this nature illustrate the factor as the persons feel it operating in their experience:

They respect my relationships as wife. They respect our authority as mother and father of our children. They treat us as equals and dear friends. (31-year-old New Jersey woman)

My in-laws have never interfered in my immediate family problems, and they never have burdened us with their problems. (49-year-old New York man)

TABLE 37

The factor of mutual respect  
in In-law harmony



Specific reason reported	Number	Per cent	
	112	14.9 %	Category number and content from Table 35
			2) They do not meddle, interfere, nor butt into my life, etc.
	38	5.1 %	7) We overlook differences; respect each other's rights; etc.
	36	4.8 %	8) They are mature, have outside interests, are independent, etc.
	33	4.4 %	10) They are congenial; are tolerant of our differences; etc.
	29	3.9 %	11) They come only when invited, do not abuse hospitality, etc.
	9	1.2 %	14) They are not demanding or possessive; want us to be free
Total Mutual Respect mentions	257	34.3 %	

Complete trust, liking and confidence from all in-laws with whom there has been contact. (45-year-old New York man)

I have not had any trouble with my in-laws. Reason—I try to give everyone a right to their own opinions. (52-year-old New York man)

Mutual respect is implemented in many ways. One New Hampshire woman tells of finding on the desk of her mother-in-law an envelope addressed, "To Myself." When she was asked what was in it, her mother-in-law replied with a laugh that into that envelope went all of the ideas she had about what other members of her family should or should not do. Whenever she did not like the "goings on" in the homes of any of her children, she kept quiet but wrote out how she felt in letters addressed to herself. When the envelope gets fat enough she burns it and starts again. Once, she says, she took time to read all the pearls of wisdom that had dropped from her pen, and found to her surprise that most of her ideas had either been in evidence in the families she was concerned about, or weren't too exceptional after all.

A woman married more than twenty-five years ago puts her convictions on mutual respect between mother- and daughter-in-law in these words,

I had great respect for my mother-in-law. I never felt that my husband should ignore his mother the moment he slipped a wedding ring on my finger, nor ever after, either. She was the first woman in his life. I the second. That was good enough for me, for I fully understood that whatever good there was in him was a part of her. Good in-laws are an asset to any family. (Mrs. V., Wisconsin)

### **No Opportunity for In-Law Trouble**

Two categories of reasons for no problems with in-laws have to do with the absence of opportunity for trouble with them. They are totaled as the "No Opportunity" factor.

TABLE 38

CATEGORIES INVOLVING NO OPPORTUNITY FOR IN-LAW TROUBLE

<i>Category Number and Content from Table 35</i>	<i>Specific Reason Reported</i>	
	<i>Number</i>	<i>Per Cent</i>
4. They are too far away; we rarely see them; haven't met	88	11.8
6. No in-laws: I married an orphan; etc.	43	5.8
Total No Opportunity Mentions	131	17.6

If merely 17.6% of the reasons for having no problem with in-laws is that there is no opportunity for trouble, then there is little justification for a strong avoidance stereotype. This percentage is significantly less than either those totalled for acceptance or mutual respect (significant at the one per cent level for each). It is clear then, that mutually constructive solutions to the in-law problem are effective in larger percentages than are the factors of distance and avoidance.

### Putting It All Together Statistically

The totals of the factors emerging from the coalescing of the verbatim categories are in the summary Table 39.

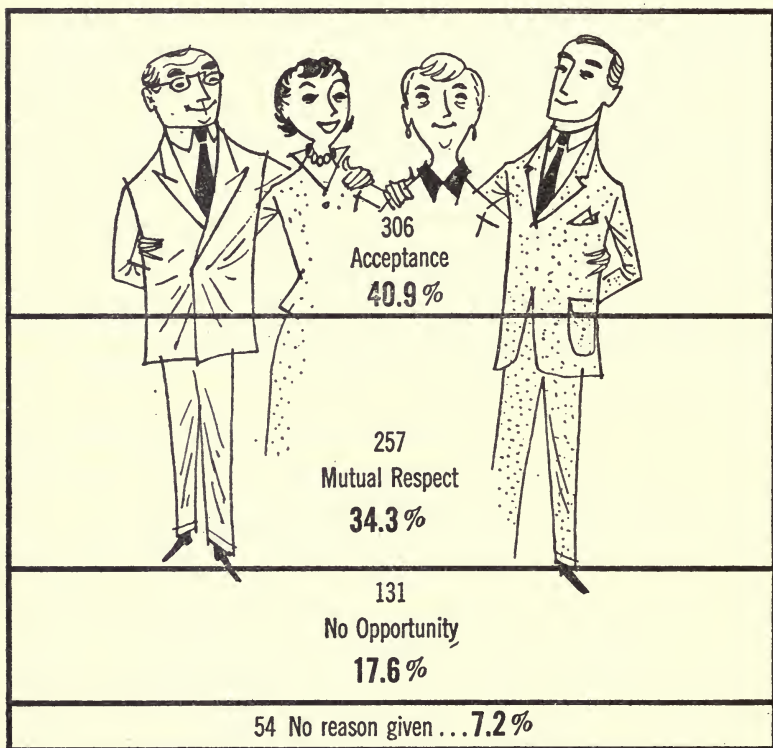
Summarizing the reasons given for no problems with in-laws we find two important factors. The first, that of acceptance, totals 40.9% of all reasons given. This corroborates the findings analyzed earlier that a feeling of belonging, or a sense of being accepted as a member of the family, is important for good relationships with relatives by marriage.

The factor of mutual respect involving confidence in each other's ability to make decisions and be free, independent persons is a close second with 34.3% of all mentions. The violation of this factor important for success in in-law relationships is the first-ranking reason given for difficulties with in-laws: meddling, interfering, dominating, etc. The data are consistent in revealing the importance of each member of the extended family respecting each other's rights, and being per-



TABLE 39

# What makes for harmony among In-laws according to 345 persons



Total mentions 748—100 %

sons of sufficient maturity and personal competence to find fulfillment without having to intrude into the affairs of relatives. Only with mutual respect can advice and help be freely given and gladly welcomed.

When there is respect for the personality of the other, and the position he or she holds within the family, there is often associated a determination to succeed in working out what-

ever differences arise within the family. These convictions are those of persons who are articulate in repudiating the mother-in-law stereotype as a rural New Yorker exemplifies,

I like my mother-in-law because she *is* my mother-in-law! Before marriage, I had heard so much about mother-in-law troubles; and some of my friends predicted I was in for it with mine, because I was marrying the only son of a very devoted mother and moving next door to her. I made up my mind then and there that I would like her and make her like me! I've had 25 years of living up to that challenge and it's grown to be a habit. I for one can testify that it really pays off. (Mrs. B., New York)

Pulling all this together, what have we learned about getting along with our in-laws that gives cues for future programs of action? Here are just three approaches about which there is little question.

### **Education for Family Living**

The twentieth century movement in education for family living has promise for making us all better in-laws. This is not an education appropriate for children and youth only. Education for family life is a life-long process. Each of us must prepare ourselves for every new stage in the family cycle. Each new role, each new relationship, each new responsibility brings new challenges for education. "Doin' what comes natchurally" is poor preparation for marriage, for parenthood, for becoming an in-law, a grandmother, or a great-grandfather. Education has a contribution to make throughout a lifetime of readjustment, re-evaluation, and reassessment of oneself in relationship to those held near and dear.

Today young people learn what it means to grow up in families. Young couples take courses in preparation for marriage and homemaking. Expectant mothers and fathers work under professional guidance toward the skills they will need as parents. Parents gain insights into child development and the interplay of adults and children in family living. Grandmothers take refresher courses in child care and discipline. Middle-aged men and women renew their skills in employment, in

recreation, in personal enrichment, and in living in the family. Members of all generations learn by critical reading, open discussion, intelligent inquiry, emotional freedom to feel with others, and the willingness to change and to grow.

Becoming a better in-law involves education in its best sense. This implies no list of pat principles to be learned and applied but rather the spirit of continued search for the better based on faith in growth. This sort of education does not have to wait until all the answers to life's riddles are in. It can begin with the present, with the readiness of individuals to improve and to grow. It can use whatever knowledge has accrued from the various fields of man's endeavor to comprehend: science, religion, philosophy. It is based upon the willingness of the person to be flexible, to keep an open mind, to raise questions without demanding immediate answers, to reserve judgment, and yet act on the best that he knows at the moment.

Education for family living in this dynamic functional sense has much to offer in helping you become a better in-law, wherever you are in a family.

### **Getting Counseling Help**

Recent decades have seen the rapid rise of personal, marriage and family counseling as an aid to better personal and family relations. The general clinical findings are that it is wise to seek professional help before problems become either chronic or critical. Long-term, deep-seated family problems are hard to treat. But, treated early, many intrafamily difficulties can be worked out.

Marriage and family counseling is recommended as helpful in much the same way that is dentistry—for periodic review of the existing state of things, as well as for the treatment of more painful conditions. Many people feel no more embarrassment in consulting a trained professional counselor than is felt in visiting a dentist.

As family relationships are kept clear of festering hostilities and resentments, differences between in-laws are less likely to

erupt. Under the skilled direction of a competent counselor, negative feelings can be drained out, and the way opened for the wholesome attitudes that make for more mutually satisfying relationships with even the most trying relatives. Local family service bureaus, mental hygiene services, guidance clinics, as well as qualified practitioners are becoming widely available and can be expected to increase in numbers and in qualifications as the public demands them.

Competent counseling is one answer to in-law problems. Both as a preventive and as a corrective approach, gaining insights about ourselves is effective in improving personal and family relationships.

### **Encouraging Family Research**

Ours is the generation that has found "Better living through Chemistry." In all important industries, research is basic to improvement. The same is true of family life.

Only as the intricacies of family relationships are explored objectively can we expect anything like the scientific advance already made in the physical and the biological sciences. Leaving man's most important relationships to the mercy of mythology perpetuates fallacious stereotypes (like those of in-laws). The study of the interrelationships of family members can be expected to reveal much that has relevance and significance.

New researchable questions arise, in the exploration of any terrain, that point to further paths to follow (such as those made explicit where they occur in this pilot study). Then, as more and more is known about any given area of life, more and more specific programs can be developed. Only thus can old wives' tales give way to discoverable truth. The recommendation is more and better family research.

### **Getting Along with In-Laws by Becoming a Better One (Summary)**

Becoming a better in-law is the most effective way of getting along with in-laws. It is better to recognize in-laws as persons



than see them through the use of fallacious stereotypes. In-law relationships are easier when you choose in-laws like yourself. You will be wise to get acquainted with your in-law family before you marry. Weddings are family affairs, and as such can do much to start off harmonious in-law relationships. Good in-laws are maturing persons, and maturity is good for family relationships generally, as well as essential for in-law harmony. Keeping the air clear between you and the larger family prevents explosive storms with in-laws. Living with your differences is important to success as an in-law and it can be learned in action. It is possible to live with your in-laws and to like it if you are ready to follow the established paths that lead to better doubled-up households. Helping mother-in-law feel important is more important than you may have realized, for a number of sound reasons inherent in her role. One out of every four men and women has no trouble with in-laws. They give as their reasons hundreds of items that make for accord in the family. The two most frequent factors by far are acceptance and mutual respect. Education, counseling, and research in family living are recommended both as preventive of and as helpful in clearing up in-law troubles. Becoming a better in-law is possible along many avenues. What any one of us does depends upon ourselves and how much we want to improve our in-law relations.

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## How to Be a Good Mother-in-Law

LEARNING HOW to be a good mother-in-law is not always easy. It may be one of the hardest roles you have ever tried to play. Quite probably you will feel unsure of just what is expected of you in many situations as a mother-in-law. No matter what you do, it may seem to be the wrong thing at times.

Part of your problem as a mother-in-law lies in finding yourself again after your children have grown. All the time they were growing up, there was no question of what was expected of you. You cared for them, made a home for the family, and kept pretty busy for a couple of decades or more. And then, the children married and left you . . . where? Who are you now that your children no longer need your mothering? Now that your job has packed its suitcase and moved out into a home of its own, what do you do?

Your husband does not seem to need you much these days. His work keeps him absorbed and busy most of the week. Keeping the home pleasant and the meals on time for just the two of you takes little time these days with modern conveniences for you with routines established through the years. So here you are after years of being important and busy, with few of your energies on tap, and perhaps feeling unwanted, almost lost.

You may feel as vigorous as you ever were, and your ques-

tion is: to what do you harness your powers? This is a relatively new question among women. Your own great-grandmother was worn out by the time she reared a good-sized brood of children. Some of her youngest may have been brought up by some other woman because she didn't live long enough to complete the family she started. If she lived to see them all grown, she rarely emerged as alive and full of energy as you are, thanks to improved nutrition, smaller families, and less drudgery in your life than hers. So, where do you go now, modern mother-in-law?

### Some Mothers-in-Law Have Wonderful Lives

You look around you and see some women having a grand time after their children have married. The woman next door goes South with her husband every winter where they work together in a Florida resort. Down the street is another woman about your age who goes abroad every summer conducting tours for school teachers. Grandma Moses paints pictures that have gained wide renown. Marlene Dietrich is more attractive than millions of girls half her age, even though she has long been a mother-in-law and a grandmother. But, not all women have it so good. . . .

There seem to be at least three kinds of women who roughly parallel the middle-aged types described by Riesman.<sup>1</sup> The first type is the *creative* women who like Grandma Moses, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Marlene Dietrich maintain a high level of constructive work that is relatively undiminished as they grow older. The second kind is the *superficial* women who have all the outward appearance of being alert and alive but whose lives flit aimlessly from one thing to another. They are well-fed, well-groomed, and busy with the restless dilettantism so graphically captured in Helen Hokinson's cartoons. The third type is the *discouraged* women who have already given up the struggle. They are the drab, dull, dowdy women who have lost interest in life and in themselves. They have none of the creative zest for life that char-

acterizes the first type. Nor do they even try to put up an appearance of vitality symbolized by the second. They have dropped out of the procession, and have nowhere else to go. Society seems to have no place for them, and they do not know what to do about it.

Before you begin to feel too fatalistic about being one of these types of women with a "that's that" sigh, perhaps we'd better recognize that creativity is not a gift, it is a way of life. Grandma Moses started to paint long after her children were grown and in homes of their own. Eleanor Roosevelt was a shy, awkward, retiring young woman who did not even know how to use her voice in public until after her family had grown. Marlene Dietrich attained her greatest popularity after she had become a grandmother. And, so it is with myriads of other women who have continued to grow creatively in their middle and later years.

### **Flexibility Is the Key**

Those who have studied what it means to grow older, and still to find life meaningful, say that flexibility is the important factor.

The movement through adulthood and old age involves changes in role activity. As one's children grow up and move away, as one's aging parents grow old and feeble, as physical energy and attractiveness decrease, as death takes away husbands, wives, and friends, as retirement takes away work, as the fires of ambition die down—as these things happen, people must learn to get new satisfactions in place of old ones, out of new activities in place of old ones. They must withdraw emotional capital from one role and invest it in another one.<sup>2</sup>

The implication for the middle-aged woman is clear. The mother who rigidly continues to "mother" her children after they have grown and married is resented as "interfering," "possessive," and all the rest of the complaints made of "Mom" as a mother-in-law (Chap. 10). But the woman who flexibly shifts her interests and activities to other creative avenues after her job of bearing and rearing her children is done,



becomes the mother-in-law who is appreciated for the alive interesting person she is (Chap. 7).

Flexibility is not a quality that may be donned as a gown when the appropriate moment comes. It is learned most comfortably through the years in action. If you have been a flexible person all your life, you will find it easier to be flexible now. If you have tended to be more stolidly traditional through the years as a mother, becoming a flexible, good-to-be-with mother-in-law will take some real effort on your part now.

### **Developmental Mothers Make Good Mothers-in-Law**

Our original study<sup>3</sup> of conceptions of parenthood in more than four hundred women shows clearly that women differ greatly in their conceptions of themselves as mothers. Some mothers see their roles in rigidly traditional terms. They feel that the things that a good mother does are to keep a neat, clean house, to keep the child healthy, to train the child to regularity, and to make the child good. Other women have much more dynamically flexible conceptions of their roles as mothers. They are considered to be developmentally oriented rather than traditional in their conceptions of motherhood, for their primary concerns are for growth and development—of their children and of themselves. These developmental mothers say that a good mother is concerned with the emotional and social well-being of her child, that she provides for the child's mental growth, guides with understanding, enjoys her children, and is a cheerful, growing person herself.

Developmental mothers are the women who encourage their children to grow and take pleasure in watching their development. The developmental mother does not keep her child dependent upon her, for she wants him to learn to live his own life, make his own decisions, and take responsibility for himself. She is able to let her child form loyalties outside herself, because she too is a growing person with interests as a woman beyond her children. She does not have to cling to

them for fulfillment, for she is finding meanings in life for herself.

It is not surprising to find, then, that developmental mothers make good mothers-in-law. For they have established patterns through the years of being parents that make it possible for them to relinquish their children to their mates in marriage, and to go on living their own lives in the flexible creative ways long proven to be good. As Sussman reports,

Parents who raised their children developmentally, i.e. growing with them as they passed through successive age periods, and who encouraged them to become independent and self-reliant, but to continue affectionate ties with family members, had an easier time in adjusting to their children's marriage status than those who reared their progeny traditionally. Elders using the latter method tended to keep a strict control over their children, and to retard their emancipation by creating a dependent relationship between them and parents. Upon the children's marriage, they had difficulty severing the emotional ties with them, and as a result were prone to interfere unduly in their married life.<sup>4</sup>

Another study <sup>5</sup> indicates that it is the mother more than the father who continues to try to control her college age children. As the children in this study proceed from high school to college, they criticize their mothers' "nagging" even more than when they were in high school, while the number of complaints of their fathers' behavior drops off after the young person is in college. This corroborates our findings that it is the mother more than the father who has difficulty shifting roles as a parent as the children mature to the place where the children feel free of interference and enjoy their own autonomy (Chap. 10).

It is clear that the mothers who have not had to feed upon their children's dependence through the years can more easily accept their full maturity and enjoy their own new roles as mothers-in-law. When the woman is a developing person herself, she can accept more flexibly the marriages and the mates of her own grown children, than she can if she has tried to "live for her children," through the years, and now cannot let them go to other arms.

### **Your Daughter-in-Law May Be Especially Hard to Welcome**

We have found that you probably won't have much trouble with your sons-in-law. The chances are that it is when your own sons marry that your problems as mother-in-law are most acute. It may be easy to be a good mother-in-law when your daughter marries. But when your son marries, you must let this man-child of yours go, and heartily accept the strange woman he brings into the family as his own.

The big reason lies in the rather special mother-son tie that is not so easily stretched as is the mother-daughter love bond. It may be especially hard for you to think of another woman taking your place in the center of your son's affections. If your son has been especially close, if he has filled an empty place in your life not fully satisfied by your husband, if you have been widowed while he has been growing into manhood, then it may be particularly hard for you to let him go.<sup>6</sup>

Your daughter-in-law may make it harder for you than your son-in-law does. Her initial anxiety, jealousy, and resentment are understandable. You represent pretty stiff competition to her. The very fact that you have been so long "the" woman in her husband's life is an initial threat. You know all her husband's preferences, and just how to satisfy them with the special recipes, and ways that he has been accustomed to through living with you through the years. You are competent and skilled at doing things that she is just learning, all the way from "baking pies like Mother used to make," to being a gracious hostess, and caring for a baby. You are established as a woman in the community, and she is but "the younger Mrs. So-and-So." Just because you are both women makes for some strains that are not present in your relationships with your sons-in-law.

So your supreme test as a mother-in-law comes in your acceptance of your daughter-in-law. If you can take her enthusiastically into your home and heart, from the very first,



you have proven your ability to let your son go, and you have cut through the barriers that might otherwise rise between you and your children-in-law.

### **Full Acceptance from the First Works Wonders**

When the mother-in-law opens her arms and welcomes her new daughter upon their first meeting, it is such a relief that many wives report that they "fell in love" with their mothers-in-law from that first warm greeting. As one woman puts it,

. . . my husband and I have only been married nine months and I had never seen my mother-in-law until after we were married. You can imagine how I felt when my husband and I went to his folks' home and had to meet my mother-in-law. My heart was in my throat, but I was uneasy for nothing. Because after my husband said, "Mother, this is my wife," she came to me and took me in her arms and kissed me and said, "Welcome into our family." And, I fell in love with her the first time I met her . . . (Mrs. A., Illinois)

The chances are that the mother-in-law who can wholeheartedly and enthusiastically welcome her children-in-law has been a good mother in the developmental sense all along, while the selfish, possessive mother finds it hard to be a good mother-in-law, as many women recognize.

One type of mother-in-law "loses" her child in marriage, makes the welkin ring with her lamentations, and is responsible for the failure of that marriage. She was, undoubtedly, a terrible wife and mother, and created, by her selfish egotism, the sort of home to which no man could turn with any pleasure, either at eventide or any other time! So, why expect some little in-law to find happiness there?

The second type of mother (bless them) gains a son, or daughter in marriage, and is at great pains to show the warmth of her welcome, and her pleasure in the new companionship. (Mrs. B., California)

You have been "in training" for the full acceptance of your children-in-law for many years. As you accepted your children's friends and pals and playmates through the years of their childhood, you learned how to love others just because



they were those your children loved. Adolescent crushes and love affairs you could take in your stride as further practice in letting children go and in accepting those they found lovable. So now, when the children marry, you can accept their mates, because you have learned to let your love for them swell to include their loved ones. You are good as a mother-in-law to the extent to which you have learned to accept others with mature, all-encompassing, all-inclusive love. You become better as a mother-in-law as you continue to practice the arts and skills of applied affection in your relationships with your children-in-law.

### **You Need Not Take All the Blame When Things Go Wrong**

Love is not enough to prevent all problems in any relationship. Even if you have done all you can to lovingly relate yourself in mature, non-interfering ways with your married children, you may still have difficulties.

"What did I do?" you ask when things go wrong in spite of your best efforts. There are times when, looking back, you can discover the ineptness on your part that precipitated the crisis. But there are many times when the fault does not lie in anything you did. It is not just what you say or do but what you *symbolize* to these young marrieds that makes for trouble at times.<sup>7</sup> It is just because you are his mother, or hers, that you get into the center of their squabbles from time to time.

The problem that embroils you with your children-in-law may not be yours at all. It may simply represent the urgent effort of the young married person to be independent, and to assume full responsibility for his or her own marriage. That is a worthy objective. But the road to it is often rough, not only for the young person but also for those who stand lovingly by and are jostled by the young married's lurching lunges toward autonomy. That is the reason why your most loving and well-meaning efforts to be helpful often elicit not appreciation but an outburst of aggressive independence.

### **How to Help Your Married Children**

Wanting to help the young married couple get established is a normal, natural desire on the part of a mother-in-law. She has nurtured this son or daughter through twenty years, more or less, and has a tremendous financial and emotional investment in the marriage. And, young marriages can do with some help.

A couple getting married starts life at the bottom of the ladder in income, and at the peak of their need for money. The first years of marriage make many demands on a couple financially. There is the home to furnish and to keep up. A car is often highly desirable if not actually a necessity. Babies cost money not only in their coming, but in their care. If the couple tries to entertain, and to establish themselves in the community, their costs mount quickly. An illness, or an accident, or even a need for expensive repairs may plunge the new marriage into desperation.

Now when young people are getting married at younger ages and in larger numbers than ever, there are many special needs for some parental assistance. A boy marries before he is through school and ready to support his wife and family. Perhaps the girl too has some further training she wants to finish before she becomes a full-time homemaker with children to rear. A man is called into service and leaves his wife in his mother's care. Or the young wife, faced with mounting bills, gets a chance for a well-paying job that she can take if she can get some reliable help with the baby.

The way mothers-in-law step in and give assistance that is sorely needed is a long story with many endings as we saw in Chapter 6. At the same time, the fact that her efforts are not always appreciated is amply substantiated in the weary mother-in-law chorus of Chapter 9.

You can do too much. In your eagerness to be helpful, you may override the self-respect of one or both of the couple. In your loving concern of the moment, you may be too lavish in your giving, to the detriment of the long-term relationship.

Without realizing it, you may expect more gratitude and appreciation than is appropriate to the relationship; for young married people can be very grateful up to a point. That point comes when the basic integrity of their own relationship is endangered.

The best way to help your married children is with restraint and consideration. You may find it best to wait until you are asked before moving in with some kind of help. It may help if you consult the young couple about something you think might be nice before actually going ahead with it for them. You may discover that taking your in-law child into your confidence about something that your own child may need averts any hurt feelings before they have a chance to arise. You may find that it pays to be sensitive to what the other set of parents is doing or is able to do before you do too much. In general, you are most helpful when you assist with what the couple really wants rather than what you feel they should have. And, your efforts are most appreciated when they come at a time and in the way that the couple is ready to accept.

It won't help you to nurse your own hurt feelings when your efforts to be helpful have been rebuffed. It makes more sense to learn by your fumbles how to play the game more skillfully. Realizing that helping is a skill that must be learned is a good first step for any woman who would become a better mother-in-law.

### **When Your Married Children Displease You**

There are times when you do not like what you see in your married children's homes. You do not like women's smoking, and yet there sits your daughter-in-law, a cigarette hanging from her lips while she feeds the baby. You have never been to a cocktail party in your life, partly because you feel that it is not necessary to drink to enjoy people. Yet your married children attend parties and give them with drinks an accepted part of their hospitality. You believe that families should go



to church on Sunday and can't see why your married children prefer to sleep late, or play golf, or spend the day at the beach. You have always washed the dishes at the close of the meal, and do not like to see the day's supply stacked in your son's home for the once-a-day dish-washing routine that makes sense to your daughter-in-law. You disagree on the way they handle the children, their finances, the care of their furnishings. You don't see eye to eye on their politics, or their philosophy of life, or their life style that shows itself as different from yours in a hundred different ways.<sup>8</sup>

When your child has married someone from another entirely different kind of family, the differences between them and you may be almost insurmountable, as we saw in Chapter 5 on mothers-in-law and mixed marriage.

In a real sense no two families are ever exactly alike. Your children's homes are different from yours, their behavior is not like yours, because they are not you; they are themselves. Just as your home was not a carbon copy of your mother's (and that may have bothered her a bit once upon a time too), so your children will build homes that are not just like yours. The world changes so fast that families have to change too if they are to survive with the flexible sturdiness that gives stability.

So, where does that put you? When you see in your children's family something different from yours, you are a good mother-in-law if you respect the difference. Mutual respect is important between families-in-law, as we saw in Chapter 16. You want your children-in-law to respect you and to let you live your own life without trying to make you over as they might like. Even more important for you as a mother-in-law is to sincerely respect the ways of married children.

One clue as to what it takes to give real respect to your children-in-law is found in cultivating your own self-respect. The busy, competent mother-in-law who does not have to prop up her own ego all the time, can tolerate differences without fear of loss of her own self-confidence. The personal threat is usually greater for the insecure, unoccupied woman



who has nothing better to do than to worry about how badly things are going.

### **Is a Job the Answer?**

One investigation of the factors that make for success between parents and their adolescent young people, came up with the interesting finding that in homes where the mother works part-time, relationships between the generations are smoother than where the mother either works full-time or not at all outside the home.<sup>9</sup>

Such evidence is contrary to the old-fashioned idea that "a woman's place is in the home," or the stereotype that good mothers do not work outside the home. The experience in many modern-day families is that mother is a better person to live with if she has something challenging to keep her occupied at least part of the working week. If she earns money, not only is her family proud of her, but she gains the independence and stature that comes with having some money of her very own to spend (a rare experience for many middle class women who have been supported all their lives).

Getting at least a part-time job after the children are in high school and beyond makes sense to many women. It makes them feel useful. They have some real responsibility beyond the children, that is respected by the family. They have avenues for their abilities and energies that otherwise might go to seed or "run wild" in the meddling in the lives of their children and husbands, so universally deplored. They get out into the world that they left a score of years ago, and feel a new interest in it, in life, and in themselves. They have something to get up for in the morning, something to spruce up for, something to keep up to date for in a way that would be much more difficult under their own steam alone.

Being gainfully employed as a woman is no longer a strange phenomenon. Recent census reports indicate that a considerable percentage of women even in the older age brackets are employed.

TABLE 40

PERCENTAGES OF WOMEN IN THE TOTAL POPULATION EMPLOYED <sup>10</sup>

<i>Age Group</i>	<i>Percentage of Women Employed</i>
14-64	34.7
65-69	13.5
70-74	7.1
75 and over	3.1

It may come as a surprise to some that nearly one out of every four women over sixty-four years of age is employed today (23.7%). What these women do may be of interest. Nearly half of them are in service in private households and other personal services, ten per cent or slightly more are professional-technical workers, managerial-official workers, operatives and kindred workers. Of these, only in the last named occupation is there a smaller percentage of women over 65 than in the 14-64 years age group.<sup>11</sup>

A mature woman considering the possibility of employment would do well to consult the United States Employment Agencies at their state and local offices located in many cities, for the fields of work in her area open to a woman of her experience and ability. A reading list of books and pamphlets on opportunities for women for part-time work, either in or out of their own homes, is available from The American Institute of Family Relations, 5287 Sunset Boulevard, Los Angeles 27, California, entitled "Spare Time Jobs for Women" (5 cents).

Before you rush off to get a job, it may be wise to ask yourself some realistic questions as to whether or not this is the best answer for you. Consider, for instance,

1. Does your husband really need your services? (if he is a farmer, or a minister, he may)
2. Would your earnings replace you in the home? (in things you could not do if you had a job)
3. Would your job put your joint income into a higher tax bracket? (where you'd actually lose money)
4. Can you get work in something you would really enjoy doing?

5. How would your family feel about your working?
6. What are the real reasons why you want to work? (are they sound?)
7. Are there alternatives to getting a job that would satisfy you?

## Volunteering Your Services

There are many ways of being useful without a paying job. Most organizations depend upon the volunteer help of women who do not need to earn money for much of the work they do. Millions of woman-hours of constructive work is done every day by the multitude of women who want to be useful to others without thought of remuneration.

In spite of the demand for volunteer workers, it may not be easy for an individual to find a satisfying niche for herself when she most needs a creative outlet. In many ways, being a volunteer can be more difficult than getting paid for what you do. The reasons are many.

1. Some organizations who use volunteer help make little real effort to suit the job to be done to the individual. If envelopes need to be stuffed, you stuff envelopes, regardless of the level of your abilities.
2. Volunteers are sometimes not held to reasonable standards of responsibility and competence as are salaried workers, with the devaluation of the volunteers' work in consequence.
3. Volunteers are not always trained and supervised in their particular jobs and so tend to be "second rate" workers in their own and in others' eyes.
4. Tenure and permanence are not expected, and a high level of turn-over of volunteer help is evident in many social and civic organizations. The inclination to walk out on the job whenever things are not going just right tends to make the woman a dilettante who flits from one well-meaning effort to another with little sense of achievement in any of them.
5. Procedures in some service organizations tend (but decreasingly) not to be established in explicit policies and prece-

dents as they are in a well-organized business. This can mean that the volunteer functions at the whim of the individual who has assumed authority at the time. The resulting discontinuity is frequently frustrating to the conscientious volunteer who is concerned for the long-term well-being of the "cause."

6. The rewards of volunteer service may seem to be sporadic and intangible in contrast to those of the salaried worker whose earnings are regular and tangible.

Many women have established ways of serving as volunteer workers. The woman who has devoted her life to her church through the years continues to be active after her children have grown and to use the additional time and energy she now has for more prominent and more promising functioning in the work she loves. So it is too with the many women who became vitally interested in parent-teacher work, while their children were in school, and then assume more responsibility with its attendant greater satisfaction as their time becomes more freely available. Teaching a Sunday School class, leading a scout troop, or a 4-H Club, or a group at the local Y are but illustrative of the many services women of the middle years continue even after their own children have "graduated" from the groups.

Other women are not satisfied to continue on through the years doing the same things over and over again. They have an urge to "graduate" to other levels as their children grow up. Leading the same group year after year, or serving in the same church circle season after season loses its challenge. But what else is there and where can a woman look for volunteer jobs that are satisfying?

The answer lies in you. If you have always enjoyed caring for the sick, and feel especially needed in the bustle of sick-room routines, you may find your outlet in your nearby hospital as a Gray Lady, or a recreation aid, or in some special capacity in a veterans' or a children's or a lying-in hospital. If your bent is more in crafts and hobbies, you may find yourself much in demand as a volunteer in a settlement, or a youth



center near you. You may be the kind of person who is deeply concerned with world affairs, and want to put your shoulder to the wheel of progress in international relations. If so, then your meat may be at the chapter of the United Nations Association in your community, or if there is none there yet, perhaps in helping establish one. Similarly the League of Women Voters, the Y's, local civil defense organizations, and many other challenging opportunities are open to the women with vision and ability these days.

The hazards of volunteering services may be circumvented by taking your work seriously enough to get involved in it completely. Only as you lose yourself in what you are doing, do you find it deeply fulfilling. "He who loses his life shall find it." The principle holds today as then.

### Joining Clubs and Having Fun

Now that you are no longer a full-time mother, you may have time for some of the many things you have always wanted to do. Now you can join that garden club and take your own gardening pursuits more seriously. Now you have time to learn a really good hand of bridge, play an adequate game of golf, take your square dancing more seriously, or develop the hobby that has always haunted you.

You may not know just where to start in learning to have fun if you have not done much of it before. When you were growing up as a young person, there was not as much emphasis on enjoying yourself as there was on getting a solid day's work done. Then you were just too busy while your family was growing up. So you may have had little experience in using your leisure time satisfyingly. If this is your problem, you may find some clues as to how to start in the books and magazines at your library. Or write the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., for a free copy of "Hobby Publications." One specific pamphlet that may give you some helpful leads is by William Menninger on *Enjoying Leisure* from Science

Research Associates, 57 West Grand Avenue, Chicago 10, Illinois (40 cents).

Special clubs for older persons are increasing in their number and richness of program. Some of these "Golden Age" clubs offer a wide variety of activities including crafts, dramatic groups, music, forums, sports, and a wide variety of special projects. The Senior Recreation Center of San Francisco, the Playmates of St. Petersburg, and the Wagon Wheel of Syracuse are three of the clubs for older people to gain national renown in recent years.

### **Helping Your Husband Retire**

Your job may be to help your husband learn to relax from his business and prepare for retirement. Many a woman has found to her dismay that her very successful husband has spent so much time and interest on his job through the years that he does not know how to retire. Three days on a vacation is enough to make him restless to get back to work. He has no hobbies, no interests that are his beyond his work. This may make him a success in his business or profession, but it is poor preparation for the later years. It is no coincidence that so many vigorous, able men simply waste away as soon as they retire.

You may be able to interest your husband in some of your own expanding horizons and bring him along with you into the new satisfactions of rich mature living. If so, then you have a double reason for continuing to grow out in more creative ways.

You both may find it helpful to read and discuss some of the many guides to retirement that have been written in recent years. Some of the readings in the Bibliography may directly apply to your interests. Your library may have materials that you and your husband would find of interest. Or you might order one of the books on the subject, like *How to Retire and Like It* by Raymond Kaighn (New York: Association Press, 1951).

## Going On with Your Education

"Grandmas Re-educated" reads the headline of a newspaper Foreign Service story dated April 1, 1954. The story goes on to say,

A school for the re-education of grandmothers has been opened in the small town of Purmerend, in northern Holland . . . (to) learn more about modern life . . . The first results have been most encouraging . . . (*Chicago Daily News*, April 1, 1954. p. 34)

This is no April Fool's joke. Nor is it unique to Holland. As we have discussed throughout this book, many middle-aged and older women are finding that education has a great deal to offer them as grandmothers, as mothers-in-law, as wives and as persons.

You may be fortunate in living in a community that has classes for people of all ages and in many subjects freely available through its adult education program, its evening schools, or its "Lighted-School-House" programs. Or your local high school, junior college, or college, or university may have certain courses open to persons with your background and interest. You may even have an adult education advisor who can help you find out what you would most like to study.

Discovering your most vital interests within the wealth of your many potentialities may be the most important first step in your re-education. The major of your high school or college days may or may not appeal to you now, twenty or more years later. Now that you have fully half of your adult years still ahead of you, as most women in their forties do, you have a chance for a "second wind." Now is your chance to rediscover your central interests and purposes and get specialized training for them. The important thing is not what you study but that you study at all. The spirit of inquiry holds the secret of vitality. As Dr. George Lawton, the eminent psychologist, puts it, "My own formula for staying young has nothing to do with pep pills, hormones, and cosmetics. It's really very simple. Concentrate on that part of you that is still growing—your brain."

## **You Can't Enjoy Poor Health**

There are people who build their lives around their symptoms. They turn their energies inward upon themselves. Their brains, not geared into anything absorbing outside, make a business of anxiety. Any stray headache or digestive upset is immediately magnified into fear of cancer, ulcers, heart trouble or any other dire illness that may strike the fancy of the moment. Any hurt feeling is followed at once by one of these favorite symptoms in a vicious circle that leads nowhere but to bed.

This is not to say that you should not watch your health. But, chances are your physical condition cannot absorb all your mental powers, and most certainly will not be improved by constant worry. Even the most "hopeless invalids" discover that they feel better when they put their physical condition into their physician's hands, and devote themselves to more creative interests.

Health principles are fairly simple. One, get a physical check-up regularly. Two, follow the regimen the doctor who knows you recommends. Three, report to your doctor any disturbing conditions. Four, avoid the fads and patent medicines that promise so much so easily. Five, get out of yourself and into creative challenges that make you feel alive.

If persons who "enjoy poor health" are those close to you, your best help is not in eternally sympathizing or pampering them in their hypochondriasis, but rather in getting them to the medical and/or psychiatric help that will lead them into better mental health.

## **Caring for Your Aging Relatives**

One student of the question predicts that—

... increased longevity is adding generations to our families and is elongating them to the extent that 5 and 6 generation families seem likely in the future.<sup>12</sup>



Dr. Albrecht goes on to picture an elongated family with a young person of 20.4 years whose mother is 47.3 years, maternal grandmother and grandfather of 72.3 and 73.3 years respectively, and a maternal great-grandmother of 88. The father is 51.5, his parents are 72.5 and 75.6, and his maternal grandmother (the youth's great-grandmother) is 94. This is not improbable in these days when the aging and aged are increasing in our population.

In 1950 there were 14,000,000 Americans over 65 years of age. By 1975 the prediction is 21,000,000 men and women over 65 in the United States (with three-fifths of them women).<sup>13</sup>

Responsibility for aging relatives is an increasing one for more and more families. Even with social security, annuities and pensions, the income of many older persons is often not adequate for comfortable living. An accident or a prolonged or critical illness may be costly and make imperative care by relatives. In the large old-fashioned farm household the care of older relatives was taken for granted. But then, there was plenty of room, and lots of chores around the place to be done by an extra pair of hands. Today the problem is not so simple and the question of "What to do about Mother" (or Father, or Grandmother, or Great-Aunt Mary) is a serious one.

The decisions about the care of sick, lonely, aged relatives are often best made in joint family consultation including the elderly person in question. There may be a nursing home or a special facility near you that will be just the answer. More likely existing facilities are crowded, and may not be acceptable for one reason or another. Then, it may fall to your lot to care for the aging relative in your own home. This is no simple responsibility to be taken lightly. It involves drastic changes in your life as well as in that of the elderly guest. Your husband and your children have a right to be consulted before you take on this additional responsibility.

Caring for aging relatives involves more than keeping them warm and dry and fed. They need, like all persons of every

age, affection and attention and a sense of being needed and wanted. This means that you will have to find a place not only for the things but also for the feelings the guest brings into your home.

Taking into account the highly specific aspects of your home, and the health and abilities of the new member of the household, new routines and plans must be established in which the older person has a real part. The newcomer may be able to take over some of the daily duties that will release you for some of the things you have always wanted to do. Or needs for nursing care may tie you down more closely than your own children ever did. Your flexibility to adapt to the realities of the situation will be your salvation, here as in your other complex middle-aged roles.

### **Independence in the Later Years**

Seeing your own mother struggle with helpless dependency may force you to consider how well prepared you are for the same contingency. You may greatly desire some real independence in your own later years. If so, it is not too soon right now to work toward that end.

First is a consideration of attitudes. If you are able to see old age assistance and social security grants as a kind of pension, you have a start toward some feeling of independence in your own later years.

The second road to later independence is through adequate savings, insurance, and annuity coverage for the last of life, laid down through the years that lie before.

A third possibility that more and more of us are finding accessible is through developing remunerative pursuits that can be followed on part time, often in the home with practically unlimited duration. Mrs. Green decorates party cakes. Mrs. White makes draperies. Mrs. Ept writes salable articles. Mother Johnson baby-sits, not only in evening hours, but over long weekends while parents are away. Grandmother Smith is a paid companion for a wealthy blind woman, a job

that came through her reading to children at the local library.

Fourth is the use of the family home as income property after the children have grown. Professor and Mrs. Hall rented out the rooms of their home near the campus to students, as their children left home, and found that the income from the rooms more than took care of them when Professor Hall retired. Other couples convert their houses into separate apartments that enable them to continue on in the family home with living quarters suitable to their needs, and regular income with little effort through the years.

And so on and on through many ways in which independence in later years may be planned for in the decades that precede. Each of us has resources which when mobilized may be our own personal answer to the fear that someday we will have to be dependent upon someone else for everything we need.

### **Living Your Own Life as a Widow**

When your husband dies, what then? The chances are, you may be left a widow, since men die earlier than do women, and are usually somewhat older than their wives. There are 7,500,000 widows in the United States now and their numbers are rising rapidly. Three-fifths of them maintain their own households, with many of them having children or other relatives living with them. Nine-tenths of all widows live either in their own homes or in those of relatives. In 1950, 385,000 (5.7%) widows were lodgers or housed as resident employees, while another five per cent lived in hotels or institutions, including homes for the aged.<sup>14</sup>

Where you go to live, and how you work things out when your husband dies, depends on you. How good your health is, how adequate your financial resources, how personally independent you have learned to be, what claims others have on you, and whether you have a home of your own that you can continue to call home, all are relevant.

In general, you will be wise to maintain your own independence as long as you can. If you have a job, you may need

it emotionally more than ever now that you are widowed. If you have a home, your first reaction may be to liquidate it and share the assets with the children who theoretically now will make a home for you. This is not always a wise decision because it robs the widow of all that is dear to her in her own home and makes her dependent upon her children and children-in-law for the rest of her life.

Public opinion now backs the woman who prefers to continue on alone in her own home after her husband dies. There was a time not so long ago when the fear of "what people will say" forced many a mother to go live with one or more of her married children rather than continue in her own independent life. Now when more and more women are learning early how to find life full and good on their own, they do not become dependent as soon as or as often as widows used to.

You may want to marry again, if the right man comes along. This time, of course, it will be different. You are older now, and he probably is too. You have learned a lot about living with others, and at the same time, you have developed a host of preferences that matter to you. Your children may or may not like the idea of your marrying again. You may feel a little "silly" as a bride in your forties or fifties or sixties or even later, but you needn't. If you have found the kind of companionship that meets your deep personal needs, you need not be held back by prudish prejudice, or by others' supposed opinions. But this may not be for you either.

For one reason or another it may be best to live with your married children. This need not be the fate above all to be avoided that folklore says it is. It may work out very pleasantly for all of you. Of course, it may be unbearable. Here are some of the things women who have been through the experience of living in their children's homes recommend.

### **How to Live with Your Married Children**

1. Choose the daughter or daughter-in-law with whom you have the most comfortable sense of accord. Personalities



differ tremendously, some clash and irritate, and others warm and strengthen each other. Remember, it's the woman of the house that you'll be dealing with most, so insofar as you can, select the one with whom you feel the closest bond.

2. Have a definite agreement about the division of the household work. If there are certain things you know you are expected to do as your share, it will be better all around than if you are always trying to search out something that may or may not please the family.
3. Keep up your own friends, interests, and activities, coming and going as much as is feasible in your own way. Invite "the children" along with you from time to time if you wish, but do not make a regular practice of expecting them to accompany you.
4. Respect their privacy, their activities and their friends as their own. This means that you will not pry into their affairs, in either direct or indirect ways. Listen when they tell you about their interests, but be very careful in expressing your opinions or judgments about them. Go with them occasionally, but don't make it a habit. When they entertain, assume that you will make other plans unless you are specifically invited. Even then you may tactfully leave early upon occasion.
5. Remember always that your job of bringing up your children was finished long ago, and that you only make a nuisance of yourself when you try to discipline or judge behavior, even with the subtlest suggestions. This holds for all areas of life, including the way in which they are bringing up their children.
6. When you see an opening where you may make a constructive contribution, or offer a helpful suggestion, talk it over with one or both of the married partners as a possibility that they may want to consider, before assuming that of course yours is the best way for them.
7. Maintain your own room as strictly your own in which you can be surrounded with your belongings and the

atmosphere that is uniquely "YOU." Invite others in from time to time to see something, or to read, or listen to radio, or whatever, but do not let your privacy be invaded more often than you can comfortably take. This may be so important that it is worth fighting for if necessary.

8. Give and receive graciously, freely, and without strings or obligations. No man lives to himself alone, especially if "he" is a woman! Each of us at times must lean, and at times can help bear others' burdens. If the giving is spontaneous, and the receiving is with appreciation, the relationship can be strengthened by its interdependence.

### **It Is the Attitudes That Count**

Regardless of what your problems are, or what difficulties you are grappling with, the most important factor is the way you feel about them and about yourself. Sometimes we are our own worst enemies. Our feelings get twisted, our perspective is askew, and the whole world seems mixed up. We feel lost, unloved, with no place to turn in our misery. When you feel this way, it is time to go talk things over with a competent counselor.

Counseling may not "fix up" the problem. More important, it can help you get your own attitudes straightened out to the place where you can see what you yourself want to do about the situation, whatever it is.

Where you go depends on who you are and where you live. Most cities have organized ways of providing counseling through churches, family service agencies, mental hygiene clinics, "Golden Age" Clubs, and so forth. Your minister, or County Health Worker, or Home Demonstration Agent may know of sources in more rural neighborhoods.

If your attitudes are primarily those of acceptance and of mutual respect, you have little to fear in your relationships with your in-laws as our study abundantly shows. If at times you are less accepting or acceptable, that is to be expected

in any normal relationship. Even respect slips a bit in the day by day chafing of intimacy. Getting off far enough to gain a clear perspective again works wonders at such a time. You'll like yourself better if you can keep emotionally well and happy. And, you'll be the kind of mother-in-law people salute as "wonderful."

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